

RE-ISSUE

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Vol. I.

{ SINGLE
NUMBER. }

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER,
116 NASSAU STREET, N. Y.

{ PRICE
5 CENTS. }

No. 194.

The Red Circle.



Springing back a few steps, Rodney drew his revolver, and shouted: "Do not come near me if you hold your life worth a minute's purchase."

CHAPTER I.

A SCENE IN THE DOCKS.

HUSH!

Step softly!

Speak low!

Uncover your heads as you advance up the pier towards the spot where yon crowd is gathered, for hidden within the living circle lies a frame which once contained life, breath, health and strength; but the immortal soul has fled, and you are in the presence of death!

So, hush! jest not, but be thoughtful of your own future.

"Does it not make you feel awed to look upon that body, blackened by decay's terrible fingers, and with still dripping clothing covered with black slime and other filthy deposits from the water?"

Does not the sight cause a shiver of horror to cross your frame, or a feeling of sympathy to enter your breast for those who have lost a father perhaps, or a husband, or a brother, or a son?

It is an every-day scene along the docks, this we have described.

Two policemen are in charge, and a third has been sent for an ambulance.

During the interim between his departure and return with the ambulance, a cab comes tearing down West street, and halts within a short distance of the spot where the body is lying.

The door opens, a young man springs out, nervously advances as the crowd separates, and takes a glance at the body.

Groaning, he closes his eyes, murmuring:

"Can it be he?"

Each one on that pier, with bated breath, watched and waited.

Several minutes pass.

With resolution expressed in every feature, the

young man opens his eyes, advances, and kneels beside the body.

No word has been addressed to the young man, no sound has broken the stillness; even the usually officious blue-coated Cerberus has forgotten to pompously exhibit his authority, and is an interested spectator.

The young man bends his head, and scans the sightless orbs before him, the nose—the cheeks—the beard; he picks up a hand and lays it down again; examines the torn clothing, presses his hand to his forehead as if trying to recollect.

For several minutes he remained thus, then rises, passes through the crowd which opens to let him pass, springs into the cab, and slams the door shut.

The horse is turned about, and at a slower pace than they came at, they leave the pier and the crowd of people, who, with wide open mouths gape in wonder at remembrance of the mysterious and silent actions of the young man in the fast vanishing cab.

Blue-coated Cerberus awakens as if from a dream, and shouts to the driver to hold on, but "Cabby" either heeds or hears him not, and pursues his way.

So perforce they settle back as before the advent of the cab, and await the coming of the ambulance.

It arrives, the body is placed within it, and driven to the Morgue, there to lie for a few days awaiting recognition, and then, if not claimed by friends, to be buried by public charity.

But it is for us to follow the cab to its destination, which transpires to be the St. Nicholas hotel.

Getting out, the young man said:

"Be on hand, in case I want you, John."

"Yes, sir."

Going into the hotel, he said:

"Send up stairs as soon as any messages come for me."

"I will," was the reply.

"Don't delay them a single minute, for God's sake," he added, earnestly.

"I'll attend to it promptly."

"Thank you," said he, wearily, and leaving the office he proceeded to the room.

Standing in plain sight was a trunk and valise, each marked:

"Rodney Ransom, Chicago."

This, then, was the young man's name.

But what was his purpose in New York?

Why had he acted so mysteriously?

The story need not take long in telling.

Six weeks before, Eugene Ransom, his father, had left their Chicago home for a visit to New York, partly for business and partly for purposes of pleasure.

There was but two of them, father and son.

Mrs. Ransom had died years before, and a second cousin of Mr. Ransom's was housekeeper for him.

On the day of his arrival in New York, Mr. Ransom had written to his son, after which no word had been heard from him, although a week later a check drawn by him was presented at his bank in Chicago, a check which drew out to within a few dollars all of the large balance he always carried.

But it was his signature; there could be no doubt about it, and although the bank officials thought it curious, they had no resource but to pay the money called for by the check.

After this incident Rodney never heard aught of his father, either directly or indirectly.

Days extended into weeks, and three of the latter periods had passed before Rodney would admit that the long-continued silence filled him with alarm.

"If I hear nothing in two days I'm going to New York," he mentally decided on the last night of the third week.

Nothing was heard.

Trunk and valise had been packed, and all was in readiness; and when the hour of midnight came it found him on board of the through express, whirling rapidly toward the great center, great in everything, as great in wickedness as it was in goodness.

In no other city in the whole world are so many contrasts of good and evil to be found, as in the metropolis of the new world, New York city.

Arriving in the city he put up at the St. Nicholas, signing himself in the register, however, as R. Rodney, doing so on the impulse of the moment, and without especial reason.

His next move was to visit police headquarters and inform them there of the disappearance of his father, who had stopped at the Astor House, visiting which place, Rodney found that his father had been there but three days; that he had

gone out one afternoon about three o'clock, and had never returned, and that his trunk was still there, and could be had by paying the amount of the bill.

This Rodney paid, and then opened the trunk and gave it a thorough examination, hoping to find some possible clew of the missing man.

But nothing that he could find told him anything new, and with a sigh he closed the lid and sat himself down to think.

Long did he puzzle over the matter, but no possible solution could he find to the mystery.

The trunk was sent to his own hotel, and there stowed away to await his future orders concerning it.

At police headquarters he had a long conversation with the chief of police, whose opinion was that Mr. Ransom had been robbed, murdered, and probably thrown into the river.

"Will you give me information as soon as any bodies are found?" Rodney asked.

"Yes."

"As soon as you receive them in the office? Remember, one thousand dollars to the man who finds it!"

"You shall have the news at your hotel within five minutes of the time it reaches here," was the reply.

Every day following, Rodney received one or two dispatches a day, reading sometimes as follows:

"Body found, pier —. Man, fifty-five, light hair and eyes; well-dressed."

Of course the descriptions varied, but they were of the same general character.

Again and again Rodney had hurriedly summoned John Powers, the cabman, and been driven in hot haste to some pier or dock, only to fail in recognizing in the disfigured, repulsive remains of humanity, any semblance to his missing father.

But lack of success only incited him to new endeavors, and he obeyed promptly every call made on him to visit some such wretched scene as we have described as meeting his gaze.

"Great God!" Rodney murmured, sinking down in his bed; "why cannot I find some trace of him? Is it possible that in this city, guarded by so many of the law, filled with detectives of world-wide reputation—is it possible under these circumstances a man can so completely vanish that not even the faintest trace can be found of him? Is it possible? Do the detectives do their duty?"

Springing to his feet, he dashed out of doors and went to police headquarters, where his face was by this time well-known.

"Any news yet?" he asked.

"No."

"Are the detectives at work yet?"

"Yes."

"Then, by the Heavens above us, I believe they shirk their duty! They should have found him before this time," he said, hotly.

"Easy, my young friend," was the reply.

"Sometimes, and not unfrequently, either, men are never heard of."

"Then it is the fault of those who conduct the search," cried Rodney, vehemently. "My father was foully dealt with, but here, in your presence, I swear by the heavens above us, to track down the murderers, and make them suffer as they did my father!"

CHAPTER II.

THE "COBWEB."

ON Broadway, not many blocks from the Fifth Avenue Hotel, there used to hang from the front of an enticing-looking sample-room a circular sign, which bore these words:

"THE COBWEB."

Entering this place one night about six weeks prior to the opening of our story, a person would have seen several men at the bar engaged in drinking some of the compounds concocted by the tall, slim, light-haired bartender, whose face was adorned by a long, tawny mustache.

Something in his general appearance gave the observer the idea that he possessed not a little refinement; his clothing was of fine material and fitted nicely; his shirt bosom, so much of it as was seen, was white as snow and had a beautiful, glossy surface. A portion of his bosom was covered by a large, dark blue tie with slender bars of dull red running across in both directions; fastened on this tie was a pin, which to persons of tender, susceptible nerves, was apt to give them cold chills. The pin was of ivory and glistening white, and the figure, a death's head and cross-bones; the two cavernous recesses in

the mimic skull, where the eyes should have been, were both neatly fitted with an emerald of fine quality and brilliant lustre. To a man of gloomy turn of mind, and immersed in thoughts of death and the grave, the shock would have been great to have suddenly presented to his view the grinning skull, and see its green eyes glaring at him.

This was Dandy Ned, the bartender of the Cobweb, as he looked and as he was dressed on that night.

The men who had been drinking paid up their score, and with a:

"Good-night, Ned," they stepped out on Broadway and were lost in the throng of theater-goers just then hurrying along to see some favorite play.

Several hours passed, and then the streets, which for a while had been nearly deserted, became alive again, as the crowds who had been to the theater went laughing and chatting gaily homeward.

Among those who left Wallack's Theater were two men, who were laughing quite merrily over some comic anecdote.

"Ha—ha—ha!" laughed one, with that open, hearty, deep-chested tone, which one seldom finds except in the west. "Good, very good," and he slapped his companion enthusiastically on the shoulder. "You're a jolly dog, you are! Let's go and get something to drink."

Stepping into a near-by saloon, one called for a fancy drink, the other for:

"Corn juice!"

"What is it?" asked the bartender.

"A little blue-grass! Don't you understand? Sling out your best Kentucky Bourbon."

The bartender smiled, muttered to himself:

"From the west as sure as blazes."

"Did you get it, Ransom?"

"What; the Bourbon?"

"Yes."

"I did," replied Ransom, wiping his lips. "A julep's swill, Billy. You ought to drink something to do you good—and that's Kentucky Bourbon."

"Every one to his own liking," suggested Billy.

"Yes—yes, that's so," hastily put in Ransom; "nothing personal meant, you know."

"Of course not," replied Billy. "Which way now?"

"Where do you say?"

"Almost anywhere."

"Well, take me there."

"Suppose we go to the Web, then?"

"Where is that?"

"A few blocks up."

"Come out, then."

And off the two men started for the Web, which was the short of Cobweb.

Entering the saloon they stopped at the bar for a drink, and leaning their sides against the counter they faced each other.

Ransom's eyes wandered over Billy's face, and finally settled on a scarf ornament he wore, which was nought else than a perfect *fac simile* of the one worn by Dandy Ned; after a minutes' gazing at it, Ransom said:

"What queer taste led you into wearing such a heathenish thing as that?"

Billy returned the laughing answer:

"Why, I think that is very nice. Don't you admire the sentiment?"

"No."

"Drinks are ready, gentlemen," broke in Dandy Ned.

"Let's punish them," suggested Billy, and tossed off a glass of wine, as Ransom did the same with another glass of corn juice.

As he sat his glass on the counter, Ransom chanced to catch a glimpse of Dandy Ned's tie, and exclaimed:

"Billy, there's another pin like yours!"

"That's not strange," was the reply. "They are quite frequently seen in New York."

"What devilish bad tastes you eastern people have," said Ransom, giving vent to another of his hearty, side-shaking laughs.

Meanwhile, unseen by Ransom, a quick look of intelligence had passed between Billy and Ned; the latter, however, seemed scarcely to understand its full import, and as much as said so, with his eyes, several minutes later.

A glass of water stood on the bar.

Dipping his finger in this in a mechanical manner, Billy, still continuing his conversation with Ransom, drew a circle on the rosewood counter.

The wet line gradually grew brighter than the color around it, until it had assumed nearly the color of blood.

Billy took a fleeting glance at Ned, who surreptitiously nodded affirmatively?

What meaning lay hidden beneath that simple action.

That is precisely what we are about to explain in this story.

Too slight a thing was Billy's marking a circle with his finger to be noticeable, and yet, behind that very thing, lay concealed one of the darkest and most damnable mysteries, one of the most horribly sickening, bloodthirsty secrets that has ever existed in the city of New York.

And Ned understood the meaning of the marking of that circle, for going a few feet toward the further end of the counter, he slightly bent and pulled a little knob.

Another simple thing, passing unnoticed by Ransom, and yet pregnant with meaning.

At the inside end of the bar a latticed screen had been erected, which shut off a sitting room from the bar-room proper.

After seeing this knob drawn by Ned, Billy said:

"Let's go inside, where we can sit down and have things comfortable."

"All right," replied the unconscious victim of a most diabolical plot, suffering himself to be led into the noose as easily as the stupid gudgeon seizes the fisherman's hooks.

When once inside, Billy led still further into a room on whose door was painted the word "PRIVATE."

After being seated, drinks were brought them in rapid succession until Ransom was far gone into intoxication.

"The time has come," muttered Billy; then aloud, "excuse me for a minute, Ransom."

"Certainly," was the reply, in a rather maudlin tone, as Billy arose and disappeared.

Left alone, Ransom began looking curiously about him, and gazing at the pictures which adorned the walls.

Five minutes passed, and growing lonesome, he grumbled:

"Why don't Billy come back?"

Just then his attention was attracted by a noise at the back door, which led, as he naturally supposed, into the yard.

"What's that?" he grunted, keeping his eyes on the door.

A minute more elapsed, then he heard the knob slowly turned, the door opened gradually and noiselessly for a few inches, and a beautiful face was presented to his view.

Slowly the door opened wider, and then Ransom saw by the light of the chandelier above his head, saw fully, a woman, most gloriously lovely; apparently eighteen or twenty years of age, large, full-formed, skin pearly white, features regular and handsome as an Eastern houri's, except that in her eyes there rested a sort of settled melancholy.

At sight of this apparition, Ransom arose to his feet, and holding fast of the table, he gazed steadfastly on her.

The girl, or woman, gazed at him as intently for the space of several minutes, then slowly raised her right arm from the pendant position by her side; when it had reached the horizontal, she beckoned with her forefinger, and uttered the single word:

"Come!"

He took a forward step, and the woman did the same; he stopped, so did she.

Slowly arose her arm again, once more the finger beckoned, while she repeated:

"Come!"

Ransom hesitated; he had been warned of the dangers of New York! Might not this be a trap to catch him?

"Come!"

The voice was low, sweet, and plaintive; the woman was gloriously beautiful!

"Come!"

What could be the mystery surrounding her?

"Come!"

Nothing did she utter but that one plaintive word, sweet toned, but with traceable woe lurking in the depths of her silvery voice.

Ransom drank in the beauty of the woman before him, drank heavily and deep, until intoxicated by face, figure, and voice, he took several forward steps which carried him as far as the door, where he again stopped.

A few feet away, in shadowy indistinctness, he saw the figure pause, and face about.

He saw, or fancied he saw, her large, mournful eyes fastened on his own; then he saw that partially uncovered, beautifully rounded arm raise again, saw the finger beckon him onward, heard the same plaintively sweet voice say:

"Come!"

How many men, sober, or the opposite, could have sat still and seen that beautiful woman beckon to them, heard her plaintive call, and not

followed to solve the mystery with which she had surrounded herself?

Not one in five hundred.

"Come!"

Ransom stepped outside the door and mutely followed this divinely appearing creature—followed her blindly, foolishly; the bird had been charmed and was being led to its certain destruction.

She flitted on a few feet ahead of him, for thirty or forty feet, then descended a pair of stairs; he followed, seeing her at the foot in the darkness when he arrived at the top.

He had nearly reached the bottom step when again he saw her not five feet away.

He gave a bound to the bottom, just as he heard the words:

"Well done, Celeste."

At the same instant the place, a long, narrow hall, was suddenly lighted up at the further end by an electric light arranged in the form of a circle, and Ransom saw the girl in company with several men.

Filled with alarm he turned to retreat, but ere he could place his foot on the bottom step, the ground suddenly gave way beneath his feet, and he was precipitated headlong into the darkness of an underground dungeon.

CHAPTER III.

THE RED CIRCLE.

WHEN Billy left Ransom it was all according to a preconcerted arrangement.

"Well," said Dandy Ned, when Billy appeared before him.

The reply was an affirmative nodding of the head, which as much as said, "all right, the thing's working successfully."

Customers standing around heard the remark and saw the answer, but, of course, saw nothing suspicious or remarkable in either.

For some fifteen minutes Billy loitered around, and then a bell under the counter gave forth the faintest possible tinkling.

Looks of satisfaction flitted across the features of both Billy and Dandy Ned, as well as lighting up the face of a new comer, who also wore a death's head pin.

"How are you, Ben?"

"Very well, Billy, how's yourself?"

"So-so."

"Going in?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"Then come along."

This conversation had been carried on in low tones after they had met at the back part of the bar-room, and when it was finished the two men disappeared into the inner room, thence went into that from which Ransom had been charmed, and following the same course the unfortunate man had taken, they descended the darkened stairway until they stood upon the spot where the victim of the wiles of Celeste had been precipitated into a dungeon beneath.

The long hall they were now in was below ground, and a musty, damp smell pervaded the place; the sides of the hall were of brick, the top of arched iron, guarded from corrosion by the wet above it by a bed of concrete; the floor was composed of flagging, which gave back a hollow sound when trod upon heavily.

Along this hall the two men went in the darkness, their movements showing them to be well acquainted with the way.

The end of the hall terminated suddenly in a square *cul de sac*, there being no apparent outlet.

Still there was more than one doorway concealed in the wall, which could easily be opened by those knowing the secret.

Billy found a spot in the mortar, upon which he pressed, and scarce ten seconds later a portion of the wall glided backward from before them, and from within the darkness a voice said:

"Our emblem is—"

"A death's head!" promptly said Billy.

They stepped through the door, which then closed behind them, silently, noiselessly, although the mass of brick must have weighed at least half a ton.

Suddenly a light shone upon the scene, and disclosed a narrow hall similar to that which they had just left; before them was a tall man, with features concealed by a mask, while a long cloak, something like a Roman toga, fell from his shoulders nearly to his feet.

With the forefinger of his right hand he touched his forehead, to which the two men replied by touching their lips in the same manner.

Taking a backward step, the sentinel had disappeared from sight, swallowed up, as it were, by the wall behind him.

Billy and Ben took several forward steps, when the wall gave way, and a flight of stairs was revealed.

Down these they went, penetrating deeper into the bowels of the earth.

Reaching the foot of the long flight, they found themselves in another hall, whose sides this time were of wood, with doors at either side at a distance of ten feet from each other.

There were ten of these doors on each side, and each door bore a number, the odd on one side, the even on the other.

Ben Stover's number was 11, and with a peculiarly-constructed latch-key he entered that room, while Billy entered the room adjoining, and marked 13.

In ten minutes they emerged from their rooms, clad in togas, and with faces concealed by heavy black masks.

Speaking no word, they advanced to the end of the hall, and rapped gently on a door, which opened at once, and they stepped into a room where were already gathered about half a dozen of toga-wrapped and masked persons.

At one end of the room was a raised dais, on which sat, in a handsome chair, a large and commanding-appearing person.

Near the corner of the room at his right hand, was a desk with an open blank book on it; seated at the desk was one of the disguised persons.

The center of the room was occupied with chairs, in number over a dozen.

The light which flooded the room came from several devices above the chairman's head.

These devices were, the uppermost, a complete circle, while under that electricity lighted up the words **STAR CHAMBER**.

Rightly understood, these devices meant "Star Chamber of the Red Circle."

Quickly Billy and Ben took their seats.

No word was spoken; no sound was heard save when several other disguised individuals rapped at the door and were admitted, only to take their places quickly.

The number augmented until the room contained fifteen persons.

Then the silence was broken by the falling of a gavel in the hands of the grand chief, and the words:

"One o'clock. Business is now in order. The grand secretary will call the roll."

Rising, the masked individual called:

"One!"

"Present!"

"Two!"

"Present!"

"Three!"

"Mark him present," said the grand chief.

And so the secretary proceeded until he reached sixteen; here he halted and sat down.

"The next business in order is to elect new officers for the ensuing year. Make your nominations, gentlemen."

"I nominate number One," said some one in the center of the room, "the present incumbent!"

"Any further nominations?"

Nene being made, a vote was taken, and number One was duly declared elected as grand chief.

A secretary and treasurer were next elected.

"Now, gentlemen," said the Grand Chief, "you are to select a Grand Inquisitor and five assistants."

The election resulted in the selection of numbers One, Two, Four, Five, Ten, and Twelve.

"Now, then, select six spotters."

These were elected,

Six, Eight, Nine, Eleven, Thirteen and Fourteen.

The remaining two were designated—Fifteen as keeper of the Outer Door, Sixteen as keeper of the Inner Door.

The election being over, the Grand Chief arose from his chair, saying:

"The results of the election have pleased me, and I think you have done well in the filling of the various positions. Our thanks are especially due to Thirteen, who, during the past year, has added largely to the successful filling of our coffers. The treasurer reports an amount of over fifty thousand dollars per man; and we have in confinement now two men, who will, no doubt, pay us handsomely. Our organization is in splendid order; its secrecy remains invulnerable as yet, and can never be discovered, except by treachery on the part of some one connected with us, which I feel sure will not happen, for we all know the fate of traitors. The Red Circle has lived and flourished for years, and, I trust, will live and flourish for years to come. All I ask of you is to work as faithfully in the future as you have in the past. Do this, and it will not be many years hence before we can let this circle drop out of existence, and live thereafter unsuspected,

with no taint of suspicion attached to us; live like princes. That is all."

Murmurs of approval ran from lip to lip until the gavel called for silence.

"We will not detain you longer, as the Inquisitors have work on hand yet to-night. The meeting stands adjourned."

The inquisitors remained behind, while all the rest, leaving the room, entered another, where a table was spread with the good things of life, while a side table was groaning beneath the weight of wine bottles filled with the choicest vintages.

"Now," said the Grand Chief, "let's to business. Five and Seven will bring the young man in; Ten and Twelve will mask and gag the other, and bring him in as a spectator. Now, then, away to the Torture Chamber!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TORTURE CHAMBER.

THE Torture Chamber was connected with the room in which the meeting had just been held by a short passage.

In appearance it looked very little like the place its name would imply.

In size, the room was not very large, and was elegantly furnished, the walls being decorated highly and the floor carpeted elegantly.

At one side was a platform two steps above the floor; against the wall was a handsome chair in which the Grand Inquisitor at once seated himself.

On either hand were two veined, short, marble columns, on one of which rested a closed book, while the other held a small electrical machine.

Directly in front of the platform was a large block of glass, which rested on the floor; resting on the glass, flashing and glinting in the light, was a highly-polished chair of brass, of queer appearance and construction, leading from which to the electrical apparatus were two wires.

This alone was all that could be said to give the apartment any character as a Torture Chamber.

And yet, little as the place looked like one of torture, with that single chair it more than outdid the fearful horrors of the Spanish Inquisition.

A few minutes passed; then, amid some commotion, a man in shirt sleeves, and with eyes covered with a bandage, was led into the room, and taken to the chair into which he was then placed.

His head having been forced back brought his neck into contact with something cold, which fitted closely about it.

Before he could move away, he felt the same thing in front, and it slowly dawned upon him that his neck was enclosed by a hasp into a socket.

His hands were seized, and his wrists fastened by movable hasps attached to the arms of the chair.

So quickly had the movements been executed, that he had no time to resist, even had he felt so disposed, which, however, would have been a very useless proceeding, surrounded as he was by so many foes, and as far, in reality, from the hearing of humanity, as though buried in the depths of an Australian forest.

His feet were next taken hold of, and soon he felt his legs clasped in the unyielding bonds of metal.

This done, silence succeeded for a few minutes, the Grand Inquisitor being in waiting for the appearance of the other prisoner.

When Eugene Ransom felt himself falling, he clutched wildly about him for something to stay his headlong progress.

But nothing met his grasp, no projection, no ledge, not even a straw; all they caught was empty air.

Spinning head over heels, he descended at least fifteen or eighteen feet, when his further descent was ended by striking into something soft and yielding.

Sobered somewhat, and fearing for his life, he quickly examined his condition and whereabouts; the yielding something on which he had struck proved to be a netting made of strips of rubber, which evidently had been placed there to save the lives of those who fell through the opening at the foot of the stairs.

He had hardly arranged these matters in his mind when he realized that the net was descending.

In a very few minutes it brought up solid against the floor, and Ransom stepped out, and like a flash the net shot upward.

Alarmed beyond description, Ransom stretch-

ed his hands before him and went groping around in the darkness.

Coming into contact with the wall, he followed it around.

From the examination he reached these conclusions—that he was a prisoner, a fact not to be gainsaid; he was in a dungeon forty or fifty feet below ground; the walls were of brick, and the floor of flagging, while it was about fifteen feet square, and altogether unfurnished, save for the presence of a low cot, the clothing of which partook of the same damp smell that pervaded the apartment.

What could he do?

He started on another circuit of the room, stopping when he had reached the iron door which afforded ingress to the place.

He hammered on it and called loudly, but no reply came, save the echoes of his own voice and the reverberations of the hollow sounds produced by pounding.

What could he do?

Nothing—plainly nothing.

He was in the power of somebody whose pleasure he must wait.

Thoroughly wretched, for he realized that his convivial habits had led him into companionship with the unknown man who had, he felt sure, betrayed him, he threw himself on the cot and gave himself up to that worst of companions—a bitterly self-accusing conscience.

"Surely they will not dare harm me," he said, and then groaned as he thought, "what have they to fear? They could murder me and nobody be the wiser."

Several most unhappy hours he spent thus, when his door opened, and two men wearing long cloaks and masks, entered; one of them bore on his arm a cloak and mask similar to that which he wore, while the other carried a lamp.

"Put these on," said Ten, handing the articles to Ransom.

"Why?"

"Never mind. Put them on," was the stern reply.

Wondering, and half-inclined, though not daring to resist, Ransom put on the toga and mask, and when threatened, allowed a bandage to be placed across his mouth.

"Now come," said Ten.

Like black-clad ghosts they glided along the halls toward the Torture Chamber, which they were not long in reaching.

Ransom gazed in wonder and astonishment at the scene before him, plainly unable to understand the meaning of the mystery by which he was surrounded.

"Remove the bandage from his eyes," said the Grand Inquisitor.

His first assistant did as requested, and torturer and victim were face to face.

The man in the chair was about thirty or thirty-five years of age, with regular features, black, curly hair, a heavy mustache and small side whiskers, while his brilliant eyes flashed defiance at those around him.

"Ready," said the Grand Inquisitor.

His assistant took up a position near the chair, and asked the question:

"Is your name Henry Barbour?"

"Find out," was the curt reply.

"Never mind, we know that much. You are from Rochester."

"Suppose I am?"

"And are wealthy," said the assistant, in a dogmatic way. "Now, how much are you worth?"

"Go to blazes and find out!"

"Easy now. No insolence, or you'll be sorry for it. You keep an account in the First National Bank of Rochester."

"How do you know that?" in surprise.

"We know; that is enough. How much have you on deposit there?"

"None of your business."

"Have you any money that can be easily got at besides that?"

No reply was vouchsafed.

"Answer!"

Not a word.

"Do you hear?"

A shrug of the shoulders was the answer.

The assistant held up his right hand as a signal to the Grand Inquisitor, whose thumb and forefinger had been placed on the key of the electrical machine.

At the signal, One pressed the key slightly.

Immediately a blood-curdling shriek jumped to the man's lips, and he fairly writhed under the electric shock.

The hand of Two fell, the electricity was cut off, leaving the victim trembling like an aspen.

"Will you answer?" asked Two.

"Never!" the poor fellow almost howled.

Up went the signaling hand again, and once more the rending, tearing discharge racked him body and limb.

"God help me—God help me—God help me!" he kept moaning, continually.

Fire seemed running out in every limb and every fiber in his body; his head seemed at the point of splitting, his bones felt as if being torn from the sockets.

With lips firmly compressed, Two raised his hand higher and higher, the key was pressed lower and lower, and the helix of the machine gave out a steady hum, having worked up to three hundred vibrations a minute.

The victim's breath came in short, quick gasps; his head began jerking violently, accompanied by legs and arms, while his face grew pale as death.

He could not stand it much longer.

Down went Two's hand, and in response the electric fluid was again cut off.

It left the victim almost too weak to speak or hold up his head.

"Will you tell us now?" asked Two.

"I—will—not."

Slowly, decidedly, firmly, the reply was given. The victim was a sight.

The perspiration stood out on his forehead in great, large drops, every ounce of flesh was quivering with the fearful strain he had undergone, a thousand devils seemed even then to be hammering at his skull, and prodding his brain; he had suffered the horrors of hell itself, yet though One's hand was stretched to press the key, he returned the defiant answer:

"I will not!"

And had courage to smile when Two uttered the terrible words:

"Then you shall die the death of the damned! Yonder subtle fluid shall rack you limb from limb, shall rend your brain in twain! Your time has come! Prepare to meet your God!"

The speaker's hand raised, the key was pressed down, gently at first, but gradually growing harder and harder.

A little tremulous twitching at first ran through the victim's muscles, which finally increased until each separate cord seemed drawn into a knot; a pricking sensation ran over his body, and finally grew until he seemed surrounded by a furnace; thousands of tons weight pressed on his head and shoulders, yet other thousands pressed him before and behind; breath came harder than ever, his head ran riot, the brain within seemed splitting, the sweat rolled in rain-like profusion from his forehead, while the blood no longer flowed through his veins.

Man never conceived torture more terrible than this.

Burning alive, boiling, hanging, anything, were preferable to this terrible death.

Stronger and stronger the current was made, until the chair itself appeared to quiver, while the victim's eyes gradually started from their sockets.

Blood spurted from his ears and nose, and covered the bosom of his shirt, dyeing it a crimson hue.

"Will you answer?" shrieked in the man's ear.

No reply.

"Will you answer?" This time in stentorian tones.

It seemed to arouse some lingering intelligence, and the head dropped forward as if answering affirmatively.

"To the chair!" cried One, releasing the key.

Quickly they undid the hasps and lifted the man out.

While yet in the arms of Two, he gave a faint sigh, and with it—*life fled*.

They had outdone themselves, and turned on just one ounce too much, and their victim was dead.

A wild cry startled the Inquisitors: it came from Ransom, who had managed to tear the gag from his mouth, and then unable to control the horror he felt, had uttered the cry.

Sinking to the floor in a heap, he groaned, in deepest agony:

"Good God, is this to be my fate?"

CHAPTER V.

THE RED CIRCLE'S DOINGS.

LIVING being never felt more thoroughly wretched than did Eugene Ransom, unmanned as he was by the terrible scene he had witnessed.

Brought into the room gagged, he could only mutely watch the progress of the horrid sight, and listen to the words that were spoken.

As the electricity was applied, and the victim began to exhibit signs of acute suffering, Ran-

som felt pity for him; but all feelings became swallowed up in one of intense horror as he saw the unfortunate man convulsed in the throes of coming dissolution.

His own breath came quick and hard; he feared that he would choke; the flesh seemed fairly to creep on his bones; and his hair to stand on end. The cloth across his mouth seemed stifling him, and raising his hands, he wrenched it away.

Scarce a minute later he saw the victim taken from the insulated chair, and then saw him gasp his last.

The horrible proceedings had burnt into his brain, and the climax appeared prepared to rend it in twain.

Then it was that he uttered the wild cry, and sank to the floor, groaning out:

"My God! is such to be my fate?"

A sardonic laugh rippled from the lips of One, and waving his hand, he said, coldly:

"Away to the dungeon with him!"

Ten and Twelve dragged the wretched man to his feet, hurried him from the room, through the hall, and to a dungeon other than that which he had previously occupied.

They tossed him roughly into the cell, retired, locked the door after them, and Ransom was alone with the darkness.

Bitter, indeed, were his reflections.

What was to become of him?

Who were his captors?

What was their motive in making him a prisoner?

The last question he could answer, for the proceedings in the torture-chamber left no doubt in his mind as to their object. It was money, even if obtained at the expense of murder.

He groaned in anguish.

All was clear to him now. He saw how he had been led into the trap by Billy Saxton, a man who struck up an acquaintance with him on the day of his arrival in the city.

Slowly but surely the coils had been wound about him, until the whole culminated in his visit to the theater, then to the "Web," (fitting name), and his beguilement by a beautiful woman.

Thinking of her, Ransom ground his teeth with rage, and cried:

"Curse her—curse her! Curse the whole sex! Why was I such a fool as to follow her to my death? for so it will end," and his tone assumed a most gloomy cast. "But it's the old story—a woman's beautiful face—a man's weakness, and his destruction. God forgive me for my past and sustain me in the future."

With head bent and arms folded across his breast, he commenced pacing to and fro in his confined quarters, a prey to the most bitter thoughts.

An investigation, made as he passed now and then, showed him that his dungeon was furnished with a bed and two chairs, the former of which he threw himself on when tired by walking; and here he lay moaning and groaning.

Finally he became quiet.

His mind had gone back to the commencement of the scene in the torture-chamber.

As each distinctly taken step of the scene was brought up he began to quiver and shake, and when he reached the point of the victim's death, he had worked himself into a perfect frenzy.

Jumping from the bed, he ran to and fro, screaming, howling, clapping his hands, and shaking his head; for the time being he was a maniac.

Bounding to the iron door, he pounded on it until blood dripped from his lacerated hands, accompanying each thump with a lung-splitting shriek.

His raving was not interfered with, for well did the members of the Red Circle know that no sound made by him could penetrate through the long halls and thick walls to the upper world.

Exhausted at last, Ransom threw himself on the bed, and from sheer weakness, fell asleep, thus shutting out a few hours of the fearful phantasies that filled his horror-burdened mind.

And now let us turn our attention to the torture-chamber.

When Ten and Twelve returned after leaving Ransom in his cell, they found the others in the act of picking up the body of the victim.

One still sat in his chair on the dais, and when they entered, said:

"Ten, open the door of the acid bath."

The rich carpet gave back no echoing tread as Ten glided across the room.

Stopping in front of a panel, distant some ten feet from the Grand Inquisitor's chair, he seized hold of a knob and then slid back a section of the paneling, disclosing a recess of five feet in depth, by twelve in length and ten in height.

In this recess was situated an ordinary shaped bath-tub, only much larger than those used in ordinary use, as in length and width it filled the

space; in height it was nearly five feet; the outside was of metal, but inside it was sheathed with glass.

Into this tub the body was unceremoniously thrown, after being stripped of its clothing.

"All ready?" asked the Grand Inquisitor.

"Yes."

"Then close the lid!"

A cover, working on hinges, was dropped so as to tightly close the tub, and then fastened down.

"Close the panel!"

Ten slid the paneling back.

The Grand Inquisitor turned around until he faced the wall.

Then stretching forth his hand he took hold of a silver crank and gave it a half turn.

There arose a rushing sound, as of some manner of liquid running through a pipe. Then came a hissing, sizzling, spluttering sound, that continued for some length of time.

As soon as its volume began to wane, One turned back the crank, with the remark:

"He will never bother us any."

Looking into his eyes as he spoke these words, the beholder would have shuddered, for flashing from those steel-blue eyes was a perfect devil.

They told you that their owner delighted in blood and murder.

"Two!"

The assistant inquisitor bowed his head.

"The book."

Advancing, Two picked up the book, which had been lying on the pedestal at the grand inquisitor's left hand, and opened it at the place where the last entry had been made.

"You know the man's name?" queried One.

"Yes."

"Put it down."

For answer, Two did as ordered.

"How much did you find on him?"

"Two thousand, one hundred dollars."

"Put that down. Can you get anything else out of his estate?"

"No."

"Very well; so must it be, but—," and his voice had a cold, blood-freezing intonation, "he was a pretty poor spec. Hardly paid for the trouble, and acids and electricity. Got it all down?"

"Yes."

"Give me the book then."

Taking the book, One arose from his chair, and going to a safe at one side of the room, opened it, deposited the book in one place, and the valuables taken from the victim in another.

Going back to the platform, he resumed his seat in the chair, calling Two to his side.

"What think you of this new game—what is his name?"

"Ransom."

"What think you of him? Will he pay?"

"Yes. Big!"

"Good! Is he worth property?"

"Yes. The Western Circle sent me word concerning him, and state that he is very wealthy, and carries a heavy bank account."

"Do you think he will scare easily?"

"Yes, quite."

"What shall we put him through first?"

"Whatever you say."

"Let it be the girdle of knives, then."

"As you say. But do you think it as good as the chair?"

"No, but safer. We'd have got this fellow to make a confession if we hadn't killed him. The chair is the best thing except for this—you can't tell exactly how much a man can stand, for constitutions vary as greatly as April weather."

"When do you purpose putting the other fellow through?" asked Two.

"To-night; that is," said One, "if it is day now. Here, in this confounded hole, with artificial light around always, it is impossible to keep track of day and night."

"It is day," said Two; "about ten o'clock in the morning."

"To-night, then, will be the time," said One; "to-night, at the hour of twelve."

Half an hour passed in utter silence, then One faced the wall again, and turned the silver crank half around in the direction opposite to that he had used before; there followed the rushing sound of a fluid substance again—at first, dull and heavy in character, and then rippling like water.

Fifteen minutes after turning the crank, he turned it back, saying:

"Examine the tub."

The section of paneling was shoved back, the lid of the tub was raised, and Ten bent above it, and glanced in.

"Well?"

"It is empty!"

And so it was! Every trace of the body had vanished into nothingness! Where had it gone?

CHAPTER VI.

ARTHUR WILSON.

WHEN young Rodney rushed from police headquarters with words of exasperation and resolve upon his lips, the official connected with the Missing Bureau gave vent to a quiet laugh.

His laugh was not heartless in character, and was occasioned by the young man's impetuosity.

Rodney's action was one the official had witnessed many a time, and a natural one it was, for the anxious seeker after a lost father, or brother, or son, could not realize that a person could be so completely swallowed up as to leave no trace behind.

Yet such could be—such daily is the case.

Numberless persons suddenly become missing, search proves fruitless, and each is added to the ever increasing volume of mysterious disappearances.

Rodney proceeded to his hotel, and went to his room.

Here he walked hurriedly to and fro, endeavoring to compose his mind, and select from the tangled skein one thread to follow.

For more than an hour, his mind was in such a tumult that consecutive thought was an impossibility.

Then, by an exertion of will, he quieted himself, and sitting down he thought the situation over calmly and coolly.

"There is but one way," he muttered; "I will play detective! Where shall I begin?"

He spent several hours in deep thought, then gave a sigh of relief as he arose to his feet.

He had decided on a course to follow, and his uncertainty and doubt should henceforth be buried in action.

The first thing he did was to hunt up an obscure boarding-house, where he hired a room, paying for it a month in advance.

Returning to the hotel, he paid his bill, and intimated his conclusion to leave.

"Get my trunks down stairs, and I'll see to the shipping of them," he said.

"Very well," was the clerk's reply. "I'll attend to the matter."

"Thank you!" said Rodney, walking toward the elevator, where stood another person waiting to be taken to some of the rooms above.

Something about the man's appearance claimed Rodney's attention, and he scanned him from head to foot.

In person he was tall and quite stoutly built; his neck was heavy and set quite deep in his shoulders, which were thrown well back; there was something about his figure which gave an observer a feeling of being in some commanding presence, and also a sort of respect for the strength that should lie in so massive a frame.

As Rodney stepped beside this person he gained a view of his face.

That also bore out the idea of this person being born to command.

The lower jaw was massive and heavy, the chin square and solid; his forehead was high and broad, but retreated very rapidly from its junction with the eye-brows and seemed to extend nearly to the middle of his head.

His eyes were deeply set, were small in size, and in color were a sort of dead stone-grey; still there was a luster in them, a sort of steely scintillation that could not but impress a person with the idea of coldness, if not cruelty.

The elevator reached the floor, the door was opened, several people stepped out, and Rodney and the waiting person stepped in.

They were joined by an individual, who said, as he entered:

"First floor."

"All right," replied the elevator runner; and seeing no one else to go up he closed the door, pulled up the rope, and the elevator began slowly to ascend.

At the first floor it stopped, and the last person to enter, stepped out.

"Next floor," said Rodney's companion.

"Yes, sir," was the reply, in broken tones.

"What's the matter with you?" was the sharp query.

"I'm not very well," was the reply, and the man's pale face vouched for the truth of his words.

He pulled up the rope, and again they slowly ascended.

Before they reached the next floor the elevator runner was trembling as if with an ague, and he

clutched at one side of the car as if too weak to support himself.

"Here you are, sir," he said, stopping at the floor as ordered.

He threw open the car door, and then that leading to the hall.

The passenger had just taken a step through the door, and one foot rested in the car, and the other in the hall, when a groan fell from the lips of the runner.

Involuntarily the man paused and looked about, and just in time to see the runner reel and totter ere falling; to save himself he clutched wildly around him, one hand fastened on the starting rope, while the other, striking the handle of the car door, flung it shut, imprisoning the foot of the passenger.

There came a heavy jar as the runner fell to the floor, and then, having pulled the starting rope as he fell, the car slowly started upward, still holding prisoner the man whose foot had been caught in the door, who gave utterance to a loud shriek of deadly fear as he was dragged from the landing and carried up with head hanging downward.

His situation was a frightful one.

Should not the car be speedily stopped, he knew that he would be caught in the narrow space through which it ran and be crushed and mangled to death.

The runner had swooned; Rodney alone could do aught to save the man's life, and he was held spellbound, chained by a terrible fascination.

Slowly, easily, smoothly the elevator car ascended, gradually carrying a victim to a fearful death.

Rodney saw the entire transaction, and when the car started he tried to arise from the seat at the back part of it; but he could not, although the shriek of horror rang in his ears.

Death was but five feet distant from its intended victim; then four—then three—then two—then one—then his imprisoned leg was beginning to be jammed in the narrow space.

Realizing his position the unfortunate man emitted scream after scream, which caused Rodney to tremble from head to foot.

But it also broke the lethargy that had held him.

Crying "God help me!" he sprang to the rope, seized it, and pulled down with all his strength.

The arrangement of friction wheels connected with the elevator was the salvation of the man's life, for the car halted and commenced descending; but Rodney soon stopped it altogether, leaving the man's head and shoulders resting on the floor of the hall.

His shrieks had drawn others to the spot, and they quickly picked him up, after which Rodney slid back the door, thus releasing his foot.

He then descended himself, and at once inquired if the man was hurt.

"Not much," was the reply given by the person himself, who had quickly recovered his equanimity, and then stood and spoke as coolly as though he had not just escaped death by a hair's breadth.

"I'm glad of it," said Rodney. "It was a narrow escape, though."

"Rather," said the man, drily. "Can you spare me a minute in the parlor?"

"Yes, as soon as I see after the poor fellow in the car."

One of the hall men at once took charge of the unconscious runner, and Rodney followed the man into one of the private parlors.

"To begin with, here is one of my cards."

Rodney took the proffered bit of pasteboard, and read:

"ARTHUR WILSON,

"Fifth avenue, N. Y."

"Thank you," said Rodney. "I am sorry that I haven't one of my own to offer you."

"It's of no consequence," was the suave reply. "Now let me say that I am very much obliged for the kindly turn you have done me to-day, and if money can reward you—" and he drew a purse from his pocket.

"Hold!" and Rodney raised his hand. "I want no favors of any kind from you, and as for money, I have enough for present wants at least; and now allow me to bid you good-day."

"A moment, if you please. Will you be kind enough to give me your name?"

For a minute the young man hesitated, then slowly answered:

"Rufus Rodney."

"Thank you. And will you drop in at my residence some time?"

"Perhaps; I won't promise. Good-day!"

Turning on his heel, Rodney left the room, mounted the stairs leading to his room, and pack-

ed up so that everything would be in readiness for removal.

Half an hour later his trunks were taken down stairs, and piled up in the hall.

Meanwhile, he had made arrangements with John, the cabman, to have them removed, and scarce more than two hours after the scene at the elevator he was domiciled in a little ten-by-twelve room in a cheap boarding-house.

Meanwhile, Arthur Wilson had been busily engaged in conversation with a man who had been among those drawn to the elevator by his shrieks.

The man, who was low in stature, heavily-built, and with dark, repulsive mien, entered the private parlor as soon as Rodney had left.

"How are you, Snacks?" said Wilson, rising to meet him.

"Passable. How's yourself?"

"About so-so."

"Come into my room."

"All right," and Wilson followed Snacks into his room.

"You got off out there by the skin of your teeth, didn't you?" said Snacks, jerking his thumb in the direction of the hall.

"Yes; but don't talk about that now; it's all over, and that's enough. Now, how are affairs out in your part of the country?"

"Fair to middling," was the reply. "How is it with you?"

"Good!"

"Glad to hear it! Did you work my last report?"

"Your last report? Let me see! What was it? Ah, yes, I remember. We did work him."

"How big did he pay?"

"About ten thousand in all," replied Wilson.

"And now, how much has the Western branch of the Red Circle hauled into the net?"

"For the past six months?"

"Yes."

"Over fifty thousand."

"Very poor," said Wilson, sarcastically.

"Yes," protested Snacks, "but you must remember that we haven't been working as long as you have, and moreover we have to be devilish careful—"

"So do we."

"Yes, of course, but wait until I finish. We have to be more careful than you, for our cities are not so large as New York, and they make more of a hullabaloo out there over the disappearance of one man than they do here over a dozen or fifteen. And besides, the branch was started more as an aid to you than an independent organization. Hasn't the information sent you been worth considerable? Why, I can count up over a hundred thousand on my fingers. There's Ransom, ten thousand—Benson—"

"Never mind," interrupted Wilson, "no more of such talk. Let's to business. You number eleven, do you not?"

"Yes."

"And you want to carry back the shares due that eleven?"

"You've hit it exactly."

"You shall have it," said Wilson. "Come along to my house."

Reaching an elegant brown stone residence on Fifth Avenue, the two men mounted the steps, and Wilson admitted himself and companion with a latch key, after which they went to the library, situated on the second floor.

Here they remained about an hour, when Snacks left, having in possession a large amount of money, carefully guarding which he started westward in the express that very night, leaving Wilson in the best of humor, for he had effected a settlement with Snacks, greatly in his own favor, a fact which made him happy, for he worshiped money as most men do their God.

CHAPTER VII.

RANSOM PUT TO TORTURE.

WHEN Ransom finally awoke from his sleep of exhaustion, he found himself still in utter darkness.

"How long have I slept?" he thought.

Instinctively his hand went in the direction of his vest pocket, but to his surprise it no longer held his watch; it was gone. He felt in his other pockets, but they, too, were empty, and the only theory he could form to account for this fact was that during his sleep somebody had entered the dungeon and gone through him.

Such had been the case.

Afraid that if he chanced to have anything in his possession that would answer as a deadly weapon, he might, if driven to desperation, commit suicide, and thus defeat their ends, One had ordered him to be thoroughly searched.

Ransom had not the faintest idea of what time it was, for day and night were all one in this underground dungeon.

But in truth it was ten o'clock on the same night that at the hour of twelve he was to be put to the torture of the girdle of knives, another hellish invention of the devilish minds of those who composed the Red Circle.

Time hung most heavily on Ransom's hands, and he was beginning to suffer somewhat from the pangs of thirst and hunger, for it was now nearly twenty-four hours since either food or drink had passed his lips.

While grumbling to himself, cursing his luck and bemoaning his fate, he heard sounds of approaching footsteps as they fell on the stone flooring of the hall outside.

They paused before his door, which was opened at once, and then two masked and cloaked figures entered, one bearing a lamp, the other a dish and a small pitcher, the one containing food, the other water.

The latter Ransom eagerly seized and gulped down joyfully, for his throat was parched and dry.

Of the food he took several mouthfuls and then stowed it away.

Up to this time no word had been spoken, but now Ten asked:

"Are you through?"

"Yes."

"Then come along with me."

"Where to?" and in Ransom's voice rang a tone of wild alarm.

"You'll find out soon enough," was the grim-voiced reply, that only added fresh fuel to Ransom's terror. "Come!"

"I won't go!" he said, defiantly, his courage coming back for a moment.

"You won't?" said Ten, significantly. "Now come!" and whipping a revolver from beneath the folds of the heavy cloak, he presented it at Ransom's head.

The prisoner wavered.

What should he do?

If they were taking him to the torture—and what more likely?—would it not be the easiest way out of his troubles to resist, and draw his captor into shooting him?

For several minutes this thought was uppermost in his mind, and he had, in fact, resolved to act upon it, when a revulsion of feeling came, and, like the drowning man clutching at a floating straw, he hugged to his breast the delusive hope that yet escape or liberty would come, and quietly allowed himself to be led like a bullock to the shambles, still dripping with the gore of a previous victim.

Halting in an ante-room, Ransom was ordered to divest himself of his coat, vest and white shirt.

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" objected Ransom, with mind filled with vague fears, apprehension, and wonderment.

"Take them off," was the sternly repeated command; "unless you want help."

"They'll never come off without it," said Ransom, hotly, growing courageous through his very cowardice.

Ten had already extinguished the lamp-light, the room being lighted by other means, so both hands were free.

"Here, Twelve," he said, "take hold, and if he gives you any trouble, just whack him over the head."

They both laid hold of Ransom, who struggled hard until he became the recipient of several skull-cracking thwacks, when realizing how impotent he was in their hands, he quieted down and became somewhat resigned to the fiats of cruel fate.

They stripped him, and forced him into a suit of tights, whose gay colors suggested some bright scene rather than the dark and bloody one so near at hand, and this accomplished, they stood in silence before a door, patiently waiting and watching.

Suddenly the door opened before them, and a watch held by Ten there showed the hour of midnight to a second.

Exact as clockwork was that murderous gang, and as steady in their blood-stained course as a clock is in marking the passing minutes.

The trio entered a room somewhat similar in appearance to that in which the electric chair was placed, and yet in some ways the room was entirely different.

It was known as Torture Chamber B, that in which the brass chair was located being designated as A.

Ransom glanced around him, and saw encompassing him the same cloaked figures that he had seen before: a sweeping look about him took in all the contents of the room, among which was

an article, the sight of which caused his blood to run cold, for he knew, instinctively, that it was some horrid means of torture, although he could not then perceive its principle.

He was handed a chair, and commanded to sit down, before doing which he carefully scrutinized it; this drew forth a laugh, and the remark:

"That one's all right, but look out for the other!"

"Four, take the book."

It was the Grand Inquisitor who spoke.

"Two, you may go ahead."

Four opened a blank book, and, with pencil poised, was ready to jot down an account of what followed.

The Assistant Inquisitor paused for a minute, then said, sharply:

"Your name is Eugene Ransom?"

"Yes."

"Are you rich?"

No answer.

"Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"Are you rich?"

No answer.

"You are stubborn," said Two, coolly—slowly—sternly. "The consequences be on your own head if you refuse to answer. One other question: *Are you afraid to die?*"

The low, intense earnestness of the tone in which the question was put, would have caused a shudder to traverse the frame of the most hard-hearted, as it did that of Eugene, who, in sight of some dread appliance of death, trembled like an aspen.

"Ah!" exultingly said Two, "I see you are not in love with the gaunt monster; but, mind you, another refusal to answer questions will result in your death! Now, are you rich?"

"Yes," came the reply, falling from blue, trembling lips.

"Money or property?"

"Both."

"Have you much money?"

"Yes."

"How much that you could get at without any trouble?"

"Seven or eight thousand dollars."

"Where is it?"

"In the bank."

"Will you sign a check for it?"

Ransom hesitated, for he feared to reply in the negative, and yet every fiber of his being cried out against being robbed in such a brutal, wholesale manner.

"Be careful," said Two, warningly. "Mind what you say."

"Yes, then," he faltered.

The pocket-book taken from him contained blank checks, and pen and ink being placed in his hands, he filled up a check for all but a few dollars of the money remaining to his account in his bank of deposit.

"So far, good," muttered Two, passing the check to the grand inquisitor; then turning again to Ransom, he asked:

"Where were you born?"

"In New Orleans."

At this reply One started a little, and bending forward, followed the questions and replies in an intensely interested manner.

"When did you leave there?"

"Twenty years ago."

"Have you any property there?"

Again Ransom hesitated—hesitated a long while, then slowly said:

"No."

"It is a lie!"

Sudden and fierce came the accusation, falling from the lips of One, who had arisen and now stood erect with folded arms, glaring sternly at the prisoner.

"Let me question him," he continued, stepping before Ransom. "It is queer I didn't recognize you before, or at least your name. Now, listen to me, and mark my words if you have any desire to live. Where is Harold Holbrook's child?"

Beneath the stern gaze of these penetrating eyes, and stung by the question flung so forcibly at his head, Ransom cowered down, and sunk his head, till it nearly reached his knees.

"Speak!" said One, hoarsely. "Where is Harold Holbrook's child?"

"Whose child?" asked Ransom, in pretended ignorance.

"None of that! Where is the child? No evasions, or you'll suffer for it!"

"I—I—don't—know," faltered Ransom.

"You lie, you do! Will you tell me?"

"No!"

"Away with him! Girdle him with your instrument of death!" and One waved his hand toward a machine in the center of the room.

In construction it was peculiar; its hight was about such as to reach to a man's neck, it was made in two parts, each shaped like a half circle, one of which was stationery, while the other was made so as to slide along on the track affixed to the floor.

These segments of a circle were constructed of bars running longitudinally and transversely, and each transverse bar had on its interior a girdle of knives with points directed inwardly; and it was to this instrument that Ransom was conveyed.

A crank on one section being turned, the jaws of the horrid thing separated, and Ransom being forced into it, was strapped fast, so that he could not move.

"Now, said One, sternly, 'will you answer?'"

"No."

"Turn the crank. Close the girdles!"

Slowly but surely the sliding portion approached the wretched man, and wild with alarm, he threw his head back, only to scream with pain, as the back part of his neck was penetrated by the points of the knives that formed a collar of steel death, for such only could it be properly called.

"Will you confess all?" asked One.

"No," was the groan, rather than response.

"Fasten him up!" cried the angry inquisitor.

"Let the knives draw blood from every point of his vile body."

Nearer and nearer those fearful knives advanced, until he could not move his neck an inch in any direction without encountering a sharp point of gleaming steel.

Slowly the crank was turned; his neck was imprisoned with not a half inch to spare; there were knives at his breast, knives at his back, knives at his sides, knives everywhere; slowly—slowly—they pressed into his clothing—slowly—slowly—puncturing his flesh—slowly—slowly—drawing drops of blood.

Ye gods! but the agony he suffered was frightful to behold.

Sweat streamed from every pore, pain racked every fiber of his body, a burdened mind added its ghastly terrors, a wicked life passed before him like a gaunt and hideous specter, causing his face to be wild with horror and his eyes to protrude from their sockets.

"God help me!" he screamed, and then the world became a blank, his unsupported head dropped forward, causing a fearful combination of gashes across his throat, from which the blood gushed in a crimson stream.

CHAPTER VIII.

RANSOM'S DEATH.

THE Grand Inquisitor had partially expected some such accident as befell Eugene Ransom, and no sooner had his head dropped forward than One cried:

"Jump! Quick! Release him!"

Ere they undid the fastenings, the weight of Ransom's head pressed the sharp points of the knives into his neck, inflicting a series of ghastly gashes, not deep enough, however, to be fatal.

The inquisitors stretched the insensible man on the floor.

"Now, Doc," cried One, "attend to him."

Seven, who had been addressed as Doc, advanced and knelt beside the unconscious Ransom, and made a rapid examination of his condition.

"Well?" said One, as Doc looked up.

"He's all right, and will come around in a few minutes."

Doc threw some water in Ransom's face, and then patiently waited the result.

It was fifteen or twenty minutes, however, before the cruelly treated man became aware of his surroundings.

Doc had stanchd the flow of blood from the wounds in the prisoner's neck, and bandaged the latter with a handkerchief; he was just finishing when Ransom opened his eyes, shuddered convulsively, closed them for a minute, and then opened them again with the low-spoken words:

"I thought I was suffering the tortures of hell!"

"You ain't far from it," thought Doc, who assisted Ransom to get up and take a seat provided for him.

Ransom appeared to be dazed and stupefied, and hardly seemed to realize where he was, or what had happened.

But not long did he remain in this condition; chancing to look about him, his eye fell on the dread instrument, some of whose knives had their points incarnadined with his blood, and encircled by which he had suffered such exquisite tortures of mind and body; in a single instant,

ay, less, the fearful truth forced itself upon him, and wrested a long-drawn, deep groan from his breast, while his frame shook with convulsive tremulousness.

With lightning speed his eyes leaped from one to the other of these cloaked figures about him until his gaze rested on One.

A moment, their eyes met.

Ransom gasped with fear as he gazed into the depths of these pitiless orbs, which somehow he remembered to have seen before; but where? He could not recollect, but could only quail and cower under their basilisk glare.

As for One, he glared in the sight of the man before him bending beneath his gaze with fear and trembling, for it augured well for the success of the questioning he intended the prisoner to undergo.

For several minutes this scene continued, no one disturbing it by the slightest motion, the simplest sound.

The silence exercised a depressing, awing influence on Ransom's mind, for it reminded him of the quietness that pervades the atmosphere surrounding the presence of death—something which he rightly supposed would be meted out to him.

"You may all retire; I wish to question this man alone. Stay within calling distance, for I may want you if he proves perverse and obstinate. You may go!"

The thick, soft carpet gave back no footfall, and Ransom, turning not his head, knew not that they were alone until he heard the closing of a door.

Then he looked around the room, and but for the presence of the Grand Inquisitor, found it empty.

One spoke, and his voice was harsh, and rough, and severe; it suggested cruelty and torture should his wishes be thwarted.

"Eugene Ransom, you refused to answer a question I put to you, and suffered the consequences of your rashness. If you do not wish to suffer more torture, thwart not my wishes. I now repeat my question. Where is Harold Holbrook's child?"

Ransom had kept his eyes fixed on One as he uttered these words, and well he knew that unless he inclined to the dictation of the man before him, that he would have to endure any cruelty which the human devil's ingenuity might devise.

The time had come for him to reply.

Should he do so?

He was known to the world as an honest man; was esteemed and respected by those who knew him, for he had a character for honesty and uprightness that was spotless.

Yet there was a passage in his life that was dark and hideous, and an answer to that question would lay it bare.

Is it any wonder, then, that he should shrink from a reply?

It was hard and cruel to give a reply that would destroy his reputation; should he by replying do so?

Besides what was to be his fate?

If he has to die anyhow, would it not be best to leave the world with closed mouth?

"Speak!" commanded One, sternly.

"Why should I speak?" Ransom asked.

"To save yourself from needless torture."

"What is to be my fate if I do not answer?" he questioned.

"Torture and death!" was the cruel, stinging answer.

"And if I do?"

"That will depend on circumstances," and the Grand Inquisitor's eyes sparkled with steely scintillations of devilish deepness.

"Then," said Ransom, "if I am to suffer death anyhow, I will not answer. Who you are that seek to pry into my life, I cannot even conjecture though I am satisfied we have met before."

"But suppose I promise to let you go if you answer me truthfully?"

"I will do so, then, to save my life, though no other cause under Heaven could unclothe my lips. What shall I have to do to be released?"

"You must answer my questions truthfully, must take a solemn oath never to lisp a word of what you have seen here; must leave the country and not return for a space of ten years, during which time you must be as one dead, for no one must hear or receive a word from you. Do you accept these conditions?"

For several minutes Ransom bowed his head in thought, then looking up he brokenly said:

"I do," adding under his breath, "God be merciful to me, who had no mercy for another."

A moment of silence; the Grand Inquisitor advanced to Ransom's side, and asked in a low tone:

"Where is Harold Holbrook's child?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do," was the curt response.

"That is, not precisely," was Ransom's half apologetic rejoinder.

"As near as you know, then?"

"In New York."

"What?" said One. "In New York? Where?"

"I don't know."

"Come—come!" was the stern exclamation.

"No more fooling. Tell me all you know of the girl at once. If you don't—" and he glanced menacingly at his prisoner.

"I will do so," said Ransom, new alarm in face, voice and manner, and amid many groans and ejaculations of sorrow at being compelled to disclose the dark chapter in his life, he told One what he wished so much to know.

After Ransom had finished, One said, severely:

"Have you told me the exact truth?"

"I have."

"Without any deceit whatever?"

"I have, so help me God!" said the prisoner, solemnly.

"Enough!"

"And now," said Ransom, eagerly, "about my release. Arrange it and let me go."

"Your release will come soon enough," said One, significantly. "Don't hurry it."

"What mean you?" cried Ransom, in a voice trembling with trepidation.

"You'll learn soon enough," said One. "What guarantee have I that you will never tell of what you have seen here?"

"My oath."

"And that is worth—exactly this," and he snapped his fingers.

There could be no mistaking what One meant, and especially situated as Ransom was; immediately he knew all; faith had been broken with him, his death was still intended; in accents of horror, he cried:

"Good God, what do you mean?"

"That—dead men tell no tales!"

"Monster! Wretch!" and Ransom, eyes blazing and teeth gnashing, bounded to his feet; he clenched his hands so tightly that the veins and muscles in his arms stood out like heavy cords, while the perspiration began oozing from every pore.

"This much I will grant you," said One, in cold, heartless tones. "You shall not be tortured, shall die an easy death. More than that I cannot promise."

"Fiend! Devil!"

"I will call my assistants."

One drew from his pocket a small silver whistle, and blew three clear, distinct notes.

"Hell-born bloodhound!"

The door opened, and the five cloaked figures entered the room.

"Seize him!" commanded One.

"Back—back!" screamed Ransom.

"Seize him!"

"Never, until I have made you suffer!" shrieked Ransom.

And with a sudden-born courage, he sprang upon One like a wild, ferocious tiger, and by one powerful blow, felled him to the floor.

Then, ere the Grand Inquisitor could arise, the desperate man jumped on him and clutched his throat with a strangling grasp.

"Take him off!" gasped One.

There was a rush toward the spot where the combatants were, and heavy hands were placed on Ransom's shoulders, and he was pulled forcibly and suddenly upward.

"Come off!" cried Two, savagely.

"Never!" shrieked Ransom. "Not until I have seen the features of this accursed villain!"

And seizing the mask, he tore it off by one desperate jerk, even as he himself was torn from One's body, like a resolute, savage lion from his prey.

The Grand Inquisitor turned quickly over, and concealed his face with his arms and the floor, but not before Ransom caught a fleeting glimpse of his features.

Whirling the mask in his upraised hand, the maddened Ransom shrieked:

"Ha—ha—ha! Wretch, I know you! You are—"

Before he could complete the sentence, Two clapped a brawny hand over Ransom's mouth, smothering in his throat the name he would have uttered.

"A gag!" said Two, quickly.

One was placed in his hand, and in less than a minute, it was securely fastened over Ransom's mouth, and at the same time the mask was forced from his hand.

"Give it to One," said Two.

The Grand Inquisitor accepted the mask with

averted face, adjusted it, and then turned towards his men.

His eyes were blazing with anger, and the portion of his face that showed beneath the mask was livid, not with fear, but with consuming rage.

"Ransom!" and the voice was adamant in hardness and coldness. "I had some pity for you, and would have spared you pain; but that is past. You shall suffer the tortures of the damned before death releases you from the agonies of the iron skull. Let it be brought out, and while it is being made ready, bind him securely."

Several of the cloaked figures proceeded to bind Ransom's arms to his sides, while several others went to a sort of closet at one side of the room, and from it took a step-ladder, a rope and a large iron skull, made in the exact shape of that of a human being. In the top at the center was a ring, and also a hinge, by means of which the skull could be opened in two halves.

The step-ladder was placed in the center of the room, directly beneath an iron hook fastened in the ceiling. The rope was prepared by a ring, and was suspended from the hook in the ceiling.

Ransom watched these preparations without a tremor or the slightest twitchings of the muscles. It is a queer fact, but a true one, that many an arrant coward, brought face to face with death, has faced it boldly, fascinated, perhaps, by the mystery beyond the grave.

"Put on the iron skull," said One.

Two lifted the instrument of torture, settled it over Ransom's head, and then closed it, after which the rope was fastened to the ring in such a manner that the victim's feet just swung clear of the floor.

It was ghastly, horrible, to look at Ransom's face showing through the outlines of the skull of iron; his eyes peered out of the eyeless sockets of the skull; his nose protruded through the jagged edge of the nasal orifice of iron; his partially-covered lips showed behind two grinning rows of whitened mimic iron teeth; his ears lay crushed against his head.

His weight being supported by his chin, was torture in itself, but Ransom knew well enough that the worst was to come, yet bore the knowledge manfully.

"Now, Ransom," said One, "you can have a foretaste of the tortures of the hell you are going to. Screw up the skull!"

On each side of the skull was a queerly-constructed screw worked by little cranks; no one responding to One's command, he added:

"Screw up the skull, Ten and Twelve."

The men advanced and simultaneously gave the separate cranks a half turn, which had the effect of closing the iron skull tightly around Ransom's head.

"Give it another!"

When given, a heartrending moan, muffled by the gag, welled up from Ransom's breast.

"Another!"

A violent tremor shook the man's body, and a prolonged groan of mortal agony welled to his lips.

"Another!" was the merciless order.

The blood gushed from Ransom's nose in a copious stream, augmented by others from his ears, while his eyes started forward from his head.

"Another!"

Ye gods! the agony that swept over Ransom's features would have caused a breast of stone to bleed with compassion.

Horrible—horrible! beyond comparison!

Ransom's eyes were suffused with blood, and at another turn of the screw of the hellish machine, they leaped entirely from their sockets, and hung only by the integuments attached to them.

"Another!"

A splitting, rending sound, a cracking as of bone, a rush of blood, a single intense groan of anguish, and Ten said:

"He is dead!"

"It is well! To the tub with him!"

The body was lowered, the skull was removed, and put away in the closet until occasion should come when it could be used again.

A satisfied smile played over the features of One, a hard, hellish smile such as might illumine the face of his satanic majesty when about to perpetrate some foul horror; One was everything that was bad; cruel, hard, selfish, a robber, a murderer.

He gazed at the body of his victim, coolly, calmly, as if it were an every-day occurrence in his life, and one on which he gloated.

A little procession was formed, and the body carried into Torture Chamber A, and there put in the tub behind the paneling, the lid was closed, the paneling put in its place, then One turned

the silver crank, and kept it there for some minutes; then he left it for several hours, when he turned it in the opposite direction, which was followed, as once before described, by the liquid, rippling sound of water.

Half an hour later, One said:

"Ten, open the tub."

The man advanced to do his master's bidding; sliding back the paneling, he raised the lid of the tub, then bent, and peered inside; for a minute he remained thus, then returned the answer expected:

"It is empty!" All trace of Eugene Ransom was swallowed up in nothingness.

CHAPTER IX.

ARTHUR WILSON.

On the afternoon of the day succeeding the night of the death of Ransom, Arthur Wilson sat in the back parlor of his elegant Fifth Avenue mansion.

In reality there were three parlors on the first floor; the front one was long and wide, and furnished handsomely; the back parlor had been originally divided from it by a pair of folding doors, composed in greater part of glass; but these had been taken away, and replaced by solid, heavy doors which were always kept securely locked; the back parlor had but one door of entrance, and that connected with the main hall; back of this again was another room communicating only with the back parlor, and fitted up as a bedroom, the back parlor itself being in all its furniture and appointments essentially a library.

In these two back rooms no servant was ever allowed to enter, except in the presence of Arthur Wilson himself.

When he went out a patent lock secured the door, and pry as they might, the curious servants were never the gainers.

The servants were allowed to do nearly as they pleased, only having to look for orders to Mrs. Gerty, the housekeeper, who in turn was closeted once a week with the master of the house.

The only occupant of all this house was Wilson and his servants, except when he chanced to have some company, which was seldom, and always of the masculine gender.

When he was in his room, none dared disturb him, and the fact of his wanting a meal was known by the ringing of a bell in the kitchen that connected with his room.

The servants all voted him a queer man, to say the least, and occasionally, when he had an eruption of temper and said cutting things, they were willing, in secret conclave, to vote him a bad man, although what direction his wickedness took would have puzzled them to say.

But they were paid well, their work was easy, and they accepted the golden salve, kept their mouths shut, and remained at their respective posts.

Wilson had just arisen.

The French clock on the mantel showed the hour of three.

"I must have something to eat first," he muttered, and gave the cord a pull.

A minute later came a rap at his door, opening which he saw the waiter.

"Well, Thomas, what have you got down stairs?"

"Almost everything, sir," was the respectful reply.

"What was cooked to-day?"

"Chicken, sir."

"Did you save any?"

"Yes, sir; it's in the oven, sir; just half of a splendid spring chicken."

"Is it all dried up?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, bring me that, some vegetables and a cup of coffee, on a tray."

Replying in the affirmative, Thomas departed on his mission, while Wilson busied himself in dressing.

By the time he had finished, a knock came at his door again.

"Come in," he called, and the waiter entered, bearing on a tray the articles requested.

"Set it down there," said Wilson, "and send Mary up. I'll ring when I want you."

"All right, sir," and bowing low, Thomas backed out into the hall, and departed to the lower regions, whence soon came Mary.

"Fix up my room and bed, Mary," said Wilson; "and be lively, too."

The girl made a short reply, and busied herself in straightening things and making the bed, which she completed by the time that Wilson

had finished his dinner, and was just ringing for Thomas.

"Take this tray away."

"Yes, sir," replied the waiter; and, taking up the tray, he and Mary disappeared at the same time, she closing the door as they went out.

"Now to business," muttered Wilson, and inserting his hand in one of his coat pockets, he drew out a handful of papers.

"Let me see," he mused. "I jotted down what Ransom said on the back of an old letter. Ah! here it is. Now let me see how much of a clew I have to work on. The girl's somewhere in New York, in the keeping of somebody named—I don't know for sure what. She is about eighteen years old or so, and if I can find her it will pay big, and that just suits—"

Rap—rap—rap, at the door, interrupted him.

"Who is it?"

"Mrs. Gerty."

"To be sure," he muttered. "this is her day. Come in," (using a louder key).

She stayed for a few minutes—only long enough to show him the bills for the week, and receive the necessary amount of money to pay them, which Wilson did not give her without a groan of anguish at parting with so much money.

"But," he said, after she had gone, in a consolatory tone, "it's money invested which pays well in the long run, and money is what I want—want, and mean to have if I have to wade through a sea of blood to get it!" and any one seeing the looks of avarice, determination and cruelty outlined in his face, would not have doubted his inclination or ability to do so.

"I guess I'll go and see Ezra Evens," he muttered; and donning his hat, he went out and down town. In Murray street he turned into a large building containing a great number of officers. He stopped before one on the top floor, whose door bore the inscription in black letters on ground glass:

"EZRA EVENS,

"PRIVATE DETECTIVE."

Opening the door, he entered, finding the detective, as the saying goes, "at home."

Evens, in appearance, was not very prepossessing, having a certain sort of sneaky look about him, which but faintly outlined the lack of principle in his composition.

In a word, he was a tool for any man, should the pay be sufficient.

He was not without a certain shrewdness, which made him able to ferret out any person, but his instability of principle was such that, could the detected criminal pay well, he might go scot free.

Wilson knew the man well, and knew that in the job in hand, he could not be false to him very well.

The job to be done was to find a certain girl, and from his familiarity with all parts of the city, Evens was the man to undertake its performance.

Wilson at once broached the subject, and quickly placed in Evens's hands all the information he had, and receiving a promise of a speedy report, he left the office, and after a saunter through some of the leading hotels, he reached his house at ten o'clock.

Going into his room, he locked the door and bolted it, after which he divested himself of his coat and vest, then threw himself down to the enjoyment of a cigar.

At ten minutes of twelve, he arose from the sofa he had been occupying, went to a closet, and took from it a long cloak and a mask.

These he donned without delay, adjusting the mask before the glass so that it fitted to a nicety; then going to one side of the chimney piece, he reached under the mantel and touched a spring, when instantly one side of the chimney fell back; he stepped through this, the opening closed, he had disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

RODNEY'S DOINGS.

RODNEY RANSOM had erased the name on his trunks, and at the boarding-house, actuated by the same freak that had caused him to do so before, he gave his name as Rufus Rodney.

The first night he spent in the cheaply, miserably-furnished room was one of misery.

An idea that his father might then be floating around New York in the waters of the bay, ran through his mind, and imagination painted the harrowing scene to perfection.

Precisely where Rodney expected to find his

father's body in the river he hardly knew, yet without doubt it was based on the fact that in the loathsome waters are hidden for a time the majority of those who disappear in New York.

He slept but little, and the next day was spent at the morgue.

Several bloated and disfigured corpses were brought in and stretched on the cold marble slab, but neither of them was the form he knew so well and cared for so deeply, for Eugene Ransom had ever been a kind father, open-hearted and free, and his son, never knowing or guessing but that his father had always been the best of righteous and upright men, loved him deeply and well.

He turned from a view of the bodies with a sickening heart, and gasping for a breath of pure air, he darted into the hall, and out of the door, where he drank in the clear fresh air, which tasted like nectar, after the fetid atmosphere of the charnel house.

He acted, and felt like one in a dream.

Everything he saw, everything he heard, seemed in some way connected with death, in horrible ways and mysteries.

He turned, and walked away from the morgue, and slowly made his way toward his new home.

When nearly there his drooping eyes were attracted by something on the walk.

Stooping, he picked it up, and gazing at it, a shudder thrilled his flesh.

The object was a mimic skull and cross-bones, carved in ivory, with eyes of emerald.

"It is in keeping with the rest," he muttered. "Death—death, everywhere! 'Tis fitting I should wear its emblem!" and with a smile of gloomy sarcasm he stuck it in his scarf.

He then resumed his walk towards home, arriving at which he went directly to his own room; a chance glimpse of his reflection in the glass, caused him to pause and look more closely at his face, which had grown thin and pale to some extent.

He caught sight of the ghastly ornament he wore, and snatching it from its resting-place, he clutched it tightly in his hand as if to break it; finding it was too small to break, he was about to fling it to the floor, when its peculiar appearance caused him to pause and look at it again; the squeezing of the skull in his hand had worked on a little pivot at the back of the jaws, and they had opened, disclosing on the inside of the back part, in such a position as not to be seen except through the open jaws, a little red circle.

Startled and surprised, he examined the bauble more closely, closed the jaws and opened them again by pressure.

Was there any significance attached to the skull with its enclosed red circle?

Rodney thus questioned himself, and after some deep thought his reply was:

"It belongs to some secret order, that I am sure of. But why they should adopt so ghastly a symbol is more than I can tell—unless," he added, after a pause, "it is significant of their business, and they are dealers in death."

The more he looked at the thing, the more he was disgusted, the more revolting it became, and suddenly he cried:

"I'll fling the hideous thing away!" but even as his hand was raised to throw the skull from his open window, he paused, prompted by something which seemed to whisper, "keep it—keep it—keep it!"

He was not at all superstitious, but there seemed something irresistible in the: "Keep it—keep it—keep it," continually sounding in his ears, and once more he stuck it in his scarf.

Night fell, and gloomy, and blue, and down-hearted Rodney sat in his room until a clock near by had struck the hour of nine.

Then springing to his feet he darted from the house, determined to go anywhere—anywhere, to get free from his thoughts, gloomy depressing, harrowing, as they were.

He took no heed to his steps, and unconsciously to himself they carried him towards the North river, and he knew not where he was until his foot striking against wood, he glanced up in surprise to find himself on a pier.

The first surprise over he walked out to the end of the pier, and stood for some minutes by the string-piece looking down on the black, glassy surface of the water, whose faint ripples now and then were silvered by the moon as it occasionally appeared through the breaks in the light clouds which nearly covered the heavens.

"Gloom, darkness, death, misery, everywhere," muttered Rodney, "and all crowd into my life!"

Walking to one side of the pier, he sat down on the string-piece, beside a pile against which he placed his back.

Here he sat for an hour or more, silent and alone, and then he was aroused by faint foot-falls of some one coming up the pier; gloomy-minded as he was he turned not his head to see who it was, and being concealed he was not observed.

Straight to the end of the pier the person walked, and there paused.

Still Rodney kept his eyes averted.

But of a sudden his interest was aroused by hearing a faint sob, a moaning cry, and the words:

"Surely God will forgive a poor, hunted creature for seeking safety beneath these darksome waters."

The voice was that of a woman or girl, and Rodney was aroused by the tone of her voice, which showed a depth of misery akin to his own; sympathy for the girl filled his breast in an instant, and he arose to his feet.

She was so intent upon her own destruction that she heard no sound of his movement, and stepping on the string-piece she prepared to take the fatal plunge.

"God's mercy rest on me."

These were her final words, preparatory to an entrance into a new life.

A single second more and all would have been over, when she heard a voice:

"Foolish girl, do you expect God to have mercy on a self-murderer?"

Turning quickly she saw his pale face upturned towards hers, and listened as he said:

"Your woe can scarcely be greater than mine, and yet I strive to bear it. Is your heart so wicked that you can't bear the inflictions of a Divine Master?"

"Pity me! Spare me!" cried the poor girl, in a tear-choked voice, falling penitently on her knees. "I am wrong, I confess it; but—oh, I could not help it, hunted as I am by that man. See! there he comes now!" and she pointed to where a man was just stepping on the pier.

Crouching in fear she crawled behind a cask, never heeding Rodney's offer of protection, and there she lay trembling and panting, until the man having passed, she arose to her feet.

"Curse the luck!" the man growled. "I thought she'd be here. I've found her here twice afore."

The girl glided away; her footsteps claimed the man's attention, and as the girl flew toward West street he broke into a run also, followed closely by the indignant Rodney, who had resolved to punish anybody offering cruelty to the poor creature.

But almost ere he knew it both girl and man had disappeared into some one of the numerous alley-ways, and were lost to sight and sound completely.

He hung around for a while and then went home, bearing in his mind the image of a beautiful, but pale and distressed face, which, but for his timely-spoken words, would even then have been bleaching in the cold embrace of the noisome waters.

The next day was passed listlessly, for despite his determination to bring his father's murderers, if such had been his fate, to justice, he knew not where to begin.

Early in the evening he left the house, and striking into Broadway, walked slowly along, glancing alternately right and left.

He felt a sense of oppression and weakness, and seeing a saloon, he entered in a random way and called for a glass of brandy; his eyes happened to fall on the bartender's scarf, and he started slightly, for in it was a pin similar to the one he had found and was wearing.

Just then another entered the saloon, and stepped up to the bar, saying:

"Ah, Ned, how are you?"

"Middling."

He, too, wore a death's-head pin.

"Have a drink with me, sir?" asked Rodney, actuated by a sudden impulse.

"With pleasure," was the reply, and shortly afterward added:

"A nice pin that."

"A nice pin that," replied Rodney, little dreaming that he had struck the right answer to a salutation of the Red Circle.

Reassured, the man said:

"Made any strikes lately?"

"No," said Rodney, answering at random.

"Affairs out west are dull, then?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to join at this end?"

"Join what?" asked Rodney, off his guard for a minute.

"Why, the Red—" and he paused, his face blanching with fear that he had given himself away.

"Red what?" demanded Rodney.

CHAPTER XI. GROPING IN MYSTERY.

"RED what?" said Rodney, finding his question unanswered.

But the person addressed only grew paler with fear, for he began to dread that he had partially given himself away to a stranger.

Rodney's mind had not been idle, and in the few seconds that elapsed between the first asking and the second, he had rapidly revolved all possible terminations to the word Red.

Like a lightning flash rushed upon him the recollection of the red circle within the death's-head pin he wore.

He knew that he was standing on the edge of some deep, dark mystery, and curiosity alone would have prompted an endeavor to solve it; taking his cue, he burst into a hearty laugh, and said, slapping the man on the shoulder:

"Be more careful in future, my boy. Now, do you mean this?"

As he spoke he gave a sweeping glance around the saloon, as if to satisfy himself that he would be unseen, then raised his hand to his scarf and with his fingers pressed the sides of the death's head, upon which the lower jaw dropped, disclosing the red circle.

Rodney's eye was fastened on the man's face to note its changes of expression, and wonderfully relieved was the look that crossed his face when he saw that little red circle, the emblem of the order; he had scarcely breathed for several minutes, so apprehensive was he, but at sight of the circle, he drew a deep, full breath of genuine relief.

Dandy Ned, the bar-keeper, had also turned pale, but he, too, now felt easier, and in a few seconds had recovered his usual equanimity, and grumbled:

"What in thunder did you give us such a scare for?"

"Merely to teach you to be careful," promptly replied Rodney. "Out west we are far more cautious, and do not speak to a stranger even if he wears twenty of these pins. In fact, out there lots of fancy boys have taken a notion to these things and they are becoming quite common."

"So they are in New York," said Ned, "but they are nearly all different from ours."

"That's so," put in spotter number Nine, who it was had spoken to Rodney: "there is always difference enough to detect which is a genuine 'circle' pin and which is not."

"But don't trust to that entirely," said Rodney, with a smile.

"I won't after this lesson," said Nine, shuddering at what the consequence of his foolishness might have been.

"Well," said Rodney, setting his elbows comfortably on the counter, "how goes everything on east here?"

"Fairly. Snacks was on a few days ago, I believe."

"Yes," was Rodney's quick reply. "He got back just as I left."

"When did you reach here?"

"Yesterday," he answered, without hesitation, yet half afraid that he was over-doing his part.

"Do you expect to stay east any length of time?"

"Yes, several months, at least."

"Would you like me to mention your arrival to the Grand Chief, and gain admission for you to the Star Chamber?"

"Yes, very much."

"I suppose you have some sort of a letter of introduction from Snacks?"

"I had one," said Rodney, "but unfortunately I lost it. However, you can prove my personality by other tests," and he spoke in a self-confident way that scattered all the lingering suspicions entertained by Nine.

"Very well, I'll report you to-night. Come around to-morrow night at eleven, and if everything is all right I'll take you inside, and—but—one question," and bending close he whispered: "What is our emblem?"

While gathering his wits Rodney gazed quizzically and smilingly at Nine, as much as to say: "What a foolish question;" then as if guided by some supernatural agency, his hand arose and its index finger pointed at the pin in his scarf.

"A death's head!" repeated Nine, "that is correct; only we use the words."

"So do we," said Rodney, coolly and collectedly; "well, I'll be here at eleven to-morrow night. Have another drink before I go?"

"I don't mind."

And taking a drink with Nine, Rodney left the Cobweb, and started toward home, his mind confused by what he had seen and heard.

What was this Red Circle?

What was its mystery?

What dark secret was it that was so nearly within his grasp?

Musing and reflective he entered the house, proceeded to his room, and threw himself on the bed, after undressing; it was hours, however, before sleep visited his eyelids, for he was groping in mystery—mystery, dark and deep.

* * * * *

When Arthur Wilson disappeared into the chimney jam, he had stepped into a narrow passage between the walls. When the secret door closed, he was in darkness dense as that which overhung Egypt in days of old. The way being familiar to him, the darkness was of no account whatever, and he commenced descending a continuous flight of narrow stairs.

So long was this flight that it seemed as if he must be penetrating into the bowels of the earth, and in fact, he had descended below the level of the cellar of the house. Here the stairway ended, there being a space of eight or ten feet square at its termination.

He paused for several minutes to rest, then stepped forward, performed some movements, when a door opened before him. Through this he stepped, and pursued his way through another passage, wider than the staircase in the wall, and longer also. The termination of this occurred at a wooden door sheathed with iron; for opening this he used a peculiarly constructed key, and stepped through it into a narrow room. Remaining here but a minute or so, he crossed the apartment, opened another door, and stepped into a hall, the same one we have described, situated on which were the dressing rooms, numbered from one to twenty.

The one from which Wilson emerged bore the number "One."

From here he made his way to the Star Chamber, and took his seat in the chair of the Grand Chief.

One by one the black-cloaked figures filed into the room, and at the hour of twelve the gavel called for silence.

Shortly afterward the question was asked by the Grand Chief:

"Has any member anything to report?"

Silence followed for some minutes.

"Have there been no captures?"

No replies.

"Has any man any prospects of making one?"

To this question numbers Eight and Fourteen made reply in the affirmative.

"That's good," said the Grand Chief. "Do your work as speedily as possible. Any other news to communicate?"

But there seemed to be a dearth of news that night, and soon the business part of the meeting was concluded, and they all adjourned to an adjoining room, where they feasted sumptuously ere retiring to rest.

This meeting was repeated, night after night, they all getting to bed at two or three o'clock in the morning, and rising late the next day.

Time passed on, Arthur Wilson met Snacks at the hotel, was saved from death by Rodney, whom he invited to call and see him. Another foolish man fell a victim to their devilish machinations, and having brought into their treasury a large sum of money, the miserly Grand Chief was happy and merry over the result of his bloody work.

It was the night of Rodney's conversation with Nine in the saloon, and the Grand Chief was in his chair, and dropped the gavel at the hour of twelve.

The usual formula of questions was put and answered, until it was reached.

"Any other news to communicate?"

At this Nine arose, and bent his head to signify his desire to speak.

"What is it?" asked One.

"To-night I saw a member of the Western Circle and promised to announce his arrival to you."

"What is his name?"

"I don't know."

"How did you first recognize him?"

"By his pin."

"Does he bring a letter from Snacks?"

"He said he had one, but lost it."

"Do you vouch for him?"

Once more a suspicion of Rodney's identity flashed across the mind of Nine, and he was silent.

"Remember!" said the Grand Chief, slowly, "any betrayal, by mistake or otherwise, of our secret, makes you liable to death. Will you vouch for him?"

A visible tremor agitated Nine, for well he remembered the words of the fearful oath he had

taken when he became a member, which in case he made a mistake would consign him to a fearful death; but he was in for it anyhow, and slowly answered:

"I will."

"So be it," said the Grand Chief. "To make sure I'll telegraph to Snacks to-morrow."

And the next morning this dispatch was sent.

"Has one of your men come east?"

Later in the day came the reply:

"Yes."

This was shown to Nine, who felt quite relieved at its receipt, and prepared to meet Rodney at the hour agreed upon.

And now to explain how Snacks' reply chanced to be in the affirmative.

One of his men had started for New York, bearing a peculiarly-worded letter, addressed to nobody, but intended for delivery to the Grand Chief of the Red Circle.

The ruffian, for such he was, arrived in the city safe and sound, and was on his way to the Cobweb when he was struck by the pole of a carriage and knocked down. In another instant his head was crushed in by a heavy stroke of one of the iron-shod hoofs of one of the frightened, high-spirited horses, who pranced over his body until it was almost a shapeless mass. Policemen were soon on the spot, the body was picked up and cared for; death had been nearly instantaneous, and the unrecognized body was sent to the morgue.

As a singular circumstance, the pin had fallen from the dead man's scarf but a few feet from the spot where he had been struck, and there remained until a strange fatality brought it to the notice of Rodney Ransom, who picked it up and wore it, with the stated results. It seemed, indeed, that a strange fate was gradually but surely undermining the well and long-kept and guarded bloody secret of the Red Circle, those traffickers in human life.

CHAPTER XII.

AMY AND FELIX.

It was late in the morning when Rodney arose, and continued thought while waking and troubled mind while sleeping made him feel hot and feverish, and so after partaking of a light breakfast, he went out to walk, thinking the fresh air would cool off and still his wandering, burdened mind.

Unconsciously his footsteps tended down town, and he found himself in the neighborhood of the North river.

Passing through Greenwich street, his attention was attracted by a small crowd and the pleading words:

"Please, sir, please don't have me arrested and I'll never do so again."

Stepping up to the outer edge of the crowd he saw in the center the figure of a girl cowering close to the walk in fear. One of her arms was held in the rude grasp of an aproned individual, evidently the proprietor of the store in front of which this scene was being enacted; the other arm was thrown up as if to ward off the threatened blow of the fruiterer's uplifted hand. Near by stood a crate of oranges, and a single one lay at the girl's feet.

A single glance told the tale.

She had taken an orange, and had been caught in the act.

"I'll teach you to steal," said the gruff-voiced fruit-dealer, and avoiding the arm upraised to ward off his intended blow, he cuffed the girl alongside of the head, drawing forth a wail of pain.

"Don't hit me—don't hit me!" she cried. "I get beatings enough at home."

Poor girl!

Once more the fruit-dealer's heavy hand delivered a stinging box beside her head.

"You brute!" cried Rodney, every spark of chivalry stirring within him; and forcing his way through the crowd, he faced the fruit dealer, saying angrily: "Strike her again at your peril!" and he laid one hand kindly on the girl's head, while he clutched the other tightly.

The girl turned her face towards her champion, and chancing to glance downward, he recognized the girl whom he had prevented from ending her life by a leap into the river's dark and noisome waters.

"Mind your own business," answered the fruit dealer, "or you may fare badly."

"Not at your hands—a fighter of helpless women," said Rodney, hotly. "What right did you have to strike her?"

"She was stealing my oranges," was the sullen reply.

"Oh, sir!" cried the girl, clinging to Rodney's

knees, and looking upward into his face, "I only took one orange, sir, and that was not for myself."

"Who was it for?" asked Rodney, kindly.

"Little Felix."

"And who is little Felix?"

"My sick brother, sir. He's dying—the doctor says dying; and he wanted an orange, sir, but I had no money, and, sir, I—I am not a thief, but I took one."

"A likely story," sneered the fruit dealer, "but since you have found so firm a champion I'll let you go; but don't ever let me see you around here again, or I'll hand you over to the police."

The girl started to her feet, and would have flown rapidly, had not Rodney detained her long enough to place three of the best and nicest oranges he could find in her hands, when off she started like a hunted deer, her face glowing and her heart, against which her treasures were pressed, beating high as she conjured up a picture of the happiness the fruit would afford the sick boy.

The girl out of sight Rodney turned to follow her, but stopped when addressed with the words:

"Hadn't you better pay for them oranges?"

"No," said Rodney, sternly.

"You'd better," said the fruit-dealer, threateningly.

"Why so?"

"Well, you'll see if you don't. There's a cop across the street."

"Very well, call him over," was Rodney's stern reply, "if you dare. Try it, and if I don't make you sick of the job I'll eat my own head."

Those standing around were of the opinion that the fruit-dealer had caught a Tartar, and he evidently thought so himself, for he took no steps whatever to enforce payment for the oranges, and allowed Rodney to depart unmolested.

Meanwhile the girl had darted along the streets, and finally turning into an alley she approached what is known as a "rear tenement," that is, one situated in the back-yard of a house facing the street.

Into the narrow hallway she dashed, and hurried pantingly up numerous flights of stairs until she reached the topmost story of the house, a miserable attic divided into four compartments; into one of these she hurried, closing the door behind her; on entering she could see nothing, so great was the change from the outer light to that which pervaded the apartment, whose only source for light was one small window containing four seven by nine panes of glass.

"Is that you, Amy?" a weak voice asked.

"Yes," replied the girl, skipping across the apartment to beneath the window, where stood a rickety cot on which was stretched the thin, attenuated figure of a boy some eight or nine years old. "See what I have brought you," and she rolled the golden red fruit on the bed.

"Oranges!" he cried in tones of surprise, wonder and thankfulness. "Where'd you get 'em?"

"A kind gentlemen gave them to me," was the reply.

"A gentleman," said the weak, thread-like voice. "Oh, how good he was. Did you know him?"

"Yes, Felix; it was—it was—the one who—"

and she halted.

"Who would not let you be wicked," said Felix, finishing the sentence. "God bless him and keep him from danger," he said, fervently. "I'll pray for him often."

Pray for him.

If Rodney Ransom ever needed prayers, he did just at that time, and during the few following weeks. But, let us not anticipate.

"That's right, Felix," said Amy, slowly; "for he's real good, I know he is. Shall I peel one of the oranges for you?"

"Yes."

With deft fingers she opened the skin and tore it off, and then divided the body of the fruit into small pieces, so that he could eat it handily.

"You eat one, Amy," he said, after he had been enjoying a part of the one she had fixed for him.

"No," she said, "I must keep them for you."

"But do eat one!" he persisted.

"No," she gaily replied; "I don't want it now, but when I'm sick and you're well and strong, then I'll eat the oranges and you must go without any."

"Ah! Amy," he replied, a smile lighting up his thin, wan face, "I'll never—never be well and strong again—never!"

"Ah, don't talk that way; you may be."

"No, never; I know all about it, Amy, for I heard what the doctor said to mammy. I'm going to die soon."

"Hush!" cried Amy, in tones of alarm; "you must not talk so."

"And then," he continued, disregarding her injunction, "I'm going right straight to that beautiful Heaven the doctor told us about."

So sweetly solemn were the low-voiced words that Amy lapsed into silence, and Felix lay contentedly sucking at the orange for some minutes; then suddenly the silence was broken.

"Amy!"

"What is it, Felix?"

"Do they have lots of oranges in Heaven for little sick boys?" and partially turning in bed, he fixed on her his supernaturally bright eyes.

"Poor child! Sad destiny! To be brought up with so crude an idea of Heaven!"

"I don't know, Felix," was Amy's soft reply, while the tears started to her eyes; "we will ask the doctor when he comes."

The answer satisfied the child for the time being, and he quietly ate his orange, and mused and wondered if they grew in that far-off Heaven, told of by the doctor who attended him for charity's sake; noon had passed ere this, and gradually the sun sank lower in the heavens until it had nearly disappeared.

"It's doctor's time," suddenly said Felix. "I know it by the shadow of that chimney against the wall."

He hardly ceased speaking, when there came a low rap at the door, and when the response to "Come in" was given, there entered an old man, with genial face and long, white whiskers.

"How does Felix feel to-day?" he asked, in the kindest of tones.

"Kind of easy," was the reply.

The doctor examined the state of his pulse, looked at his tongue by the light of a match, and then a shadow of sorrow and regret crossed his face; he bent his head in thought, in the midst of which he was interrupted with:

"Doctor!"

"What is it, my boy?" and the physician bent above him.

"Do they have lots of oranges in Heaven?"

"Why?" asked the doctor, scarce knowing how to reply or what to say.

"'Cause I like 'em so much when I'm hot, and I feel all burned up—here," and laid one attenuated hand on his throat.

"It was a queer conceit, but if it would soothe his remaining hours on earth, why not tell him an untruth? So thought the doctor, and his reply was:

"I think so, Felix, for there they have everything good, although there, sickness and pain and headaches never come."

"That's funny, ain't it?" said the boy.

"Not when you understand it," replied the doctor, his eyes dampened by a suspicious moisture, "not when you understand it."

"No stone bruises or stubbed toes, either? No being hungry?" queried Felix.

"No."

"And they do have oranges?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm glad I'm going there," he said, joyfully, and exhausted by so much talking, sank weakly back on his pillow.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INITIATION.

RODNEY would have followed Amy to her home could he have done so, but as she vanished this was of course impossible.

He paid no attention to the direction he took, and finding himself on Broadway, he slowly walked up town.

By the time he had reached the neighborhood of Fourteenth street, it was three o'clock, as he learned by drawing out his watch, in doing which he also pulled out a card, upon glancing at which he muttered:

"I half promised to call on him. I guess I will," he added, conclusively. "Let me see. Arthur Wilson, number — Fifth avenue. That can't be far from here."

He turned into Fifth avenue and walked up it until he found the number.

Mounting the steps, he rang the bell, and inquired of Thomas if Mr. Wilson was at home.

"I don't know," was the evasive reply. "Step inside, sir, and I'll see. What's the name?"

"Rufus Rodney."

Thomas was in a quandary.

Ordinarily he would not have called his master, but his custom was to have arisen ere this time of day, so he thought he would dare venture acquainting him with his visitor's presence.

He knocked lightly at the door.

"Who's there?" came the short question.

"I, sir."

"What do you want?"

"There's a gentleman here to see you."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Rodney, sir."

"Rodney—Rodney!" muttered Wilson, who was just dressing. "Rodney—Rodney! Ah, I remember. He was the young—tell him to step into the front parlor," suddenly raising his tone and concluding his soliloquy.

The young man stepped into the parlor, and patiently awaited Wilson's coming, meanwhile employing the time by an examination of the pictures against the wall, and by peering between the corners of the books scattered about.

"Ah! Mr. Rodney, how are you?"

Turning, he found himself face to face with Wilson, who had entered so quietly as to be unheard.

"Mr. Wilson," said Rodney, taking the proffered hand of fellowship, "I hope you have fully recovered after your close escape at the hotel."

"Such is the case, many thanks to your brave and hearty endeavors in my behalf," was the courteous reply of Mr. Wilson, whose sharp eyes were wandering swiftly over the form and features of the young man before him.

Rodney noticed the scrutiny, and thought it very uncivil for a host to so treat a visitor, yet he was generous enough in nature to let the matter drop by attributing it to a peculiarity rather than a desire to make him feel ill at ease.

He still wore the death's head pin, the sight of which gave Wilson a great start.

"My dear fellow," he blandly said, "let me order you a glass of wine."

"No, thank you," said Rodney, "I am not in need of it, and only dropped in to inquire how you were getting along."

"But sit down; you cannot be in too much of a hurry to spend a few minutes with me."

The invitation was given in so cordial a tone that Rodney could not well refuse, and accepted the proffered chair.

Some minutes were spent in a desultory conversation, and then Wilson said, in a wily way:

"How in the world do you chance to wear such an ornament as that?" pointing at the death's-head pin.

"A mere freak of fancy," replied Rodney, in an off-hand manner.

"It's a rather queer object to carry around with one. It's a little ghastly in design, but I shouldn't mind having one myself. Who made it for you?"

Rodney had it on his tongue's end to tell Mr. Wilson how the pin came in his possession, but a certain something in the eyes of the questioner, a deep, wily, snaky look, caused him to pause; on reflection he recollected that to him Wilson was a stranger, and there was a possibility that he could not be trusted, so he replied:

"It was not made where I could refer you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that it came into my hands under peculiar circumstances whose nature I cannot explain to you."

"You must excuse my apparent inquisitiveness!" said Wilson, apologetically.

"Certainly," said Rodney, rising as he spoke.

"You are not going yet?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry you don't stay longer. Come in and see me again before long."

"Thank you," said Rodney. "I will try to do so."

Wilson accompanied him as far as the door, saw him descend the steps and then returned to his private room, had his dinner brought up, and eating it, thought:

"I wonder if that's the fellow of Snacks' who came east. It can hardly be, though, for he was here when Snacks was. I must watch the newcomer closely."

After finishing his dinner he sat down and wrote as follows:

"BENSON:

"That western friend of yours, if he wishes to enter our room, must go through our form of initiation. See that you have him in readiness and put him in room 18. Yours,

"ONE."

Going out of the house shortly afterward, he dropped this note in the Cobweb, addressed to Peter Benson, saying to Dandy Ned:

"See that he gets that."

"All right."

"Good-day."

"Ditto," replied the bar-keeper, as Wilson left and turned up Broadway.

At ten o'clock Nine came in and was handed the communication.

After reading it several times he tore it up and destroyed the pieces in the flame of a spirit lamp.

Very nearly an hour had dragged its slow length when Rodney Ransom entered the place and saluted Nine with:

"Ah! here on time."

"Yes, and I see that you are too."

"Of course," replied Rodney. "Take a drink?"

After a single drink, at Nine's suggestion, they adjourned to the back room, where the conversation was opened by Benson's saying:

"One thing I forgot last night was, that if you go in to-night, you will have to go through our form of initiation. Are you willing to do that?"

The question rather staggered Rodney, for he had prepared himself for nothing of the kind; should he do so?

He knew not of what it might consist, and should he trust himself in the hands of a band of bad and powerful men of whom he knew nothing whatever?

"I don't know," he slowly answered. "Of what does it consist?"

"Practically the same as the initiation in the Western Circle, I suppose; that is, the oath of fealty and the branding with our mark. Do you practise that west?"

"No," hazarded Rodney.

"And you will go through it?" eagerly asked Nine, who, for his own sake, wished Rodney safely through any test that might be devised.

For a moment or two Rodney paused; he knew that he was taking his life in his hand in going further into the mystery; still, in the solving of it lay a fearful fascination which impelled him onward, and his reckless reply was:

"I will."

So it was settled, and Rodney was to beard the lion in his den.

"What is your name?" asked Nine.

"Harry Thompson," said Rodney, inventing the name on the spur of the moment.

At half past eleven Nine arose and said:

"Now come along and be perfectly quiet."

Through the private room, out of the back door, through the little shed, down the steps his ill-starred father had trod, Nine led Rodney; the question and reply were given, and they penetrated deeper into the bowels of the earth.

"This is your room," said Nine, pointing to 18.

"I will go in with you."

They entered the room, and by his companion's directions Rodney took off all of his clothes except his pants; after this he donned a cloak and then a black mask.

"Stay here until I return," said Nine, and glided away, to soon come back dressed in cloak and mask.

The hour of twelve was scarce two minutes distant when they entered the star chamber; at precisely twelve the gavel fell and all was silence.

One arose slowly from his chair.

"There is one among us belonging to the Western Circle who desires to become one of us. Let him arise."

Suppressing a natural tremor at such surroundings, Rodney arose up, but not until he had satisfied himself of the safety of a revolver he had placed in a hip pocket, to be used if the worst came, although he could not but realize how little show he stood in the hands and power of these men as he was so absolutely.

"Your name?"

"Harry Thompson."

"Age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Residence?"

"Chicago."

"Occupation?"

"None."

"You come here of your own free will?"

"I do."

"And are willing to take what comes?"

"I am."

"Then repeat after me this oath after you have advanced before me."

The spot was indicated, and Rodney stepped upon it; hardly had he done so when the floor glided away from him on all sides, and he was standing in the center of a large space.

"Look down!"

He did so, and saw the foul, slimy filth of a sewer.

"In case you falter, that becomes your grave. Do you understand?"

Rodney glanced at the Grand Chief, then turned away his head with the thought: "Where have I seen those eyes?"

"Now," said One, and Rodney repeated after him.

"May my flesh become jelly, may my bones become dust, may my soul rot in hell if ever I do aught to the detriment of the order of which I now become a member. I swear by the devil and his angels, by the God above us, by all that is holy, by all that is hellish, to do in all my power to advance the interests of the Red Circle; and if I do aught to betray the order I hereby authorize any or all of my companions present to murder me at sight, to rend me limb from limb, to do anything they may devise to render my life a very hell ere it has left my body, to all of which I swear by this, the emblem of our order."

At these last words a human skull was placed in his hands, and to its grinning, ghastly jaws, he pressed his lips.

The floor closed, and he took a step nearer the Grand Chief.

"You are now required to uncover your features for the first and only time."

Rodney's hand mounted to the mask and there remained, while once more he took a look at the basilisk eyes which gleamed down upon him from the chair.

"Take it off!"

His hand dropped to his side.

"Take it off!"

He made no effort to do so.

A sign from One; four men leaped forward with drawn knives, upraised, pointed at his heart, while a fifth figure rent off the mask.

"He is a spy!" cried One. "You know the fate of such."

The blades flashed about him on all sides, but springing back a few steps, Rodney drew his revolver, and shouted with nervous desperation:

"Do not come near me if you hold your life worth a minute's purchase."

There came a hollow laugh, and Rodney felt the floor giving way beneath him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE STEAM ROOM.

THAT was a tragic scene, indeed.

Young Rodney was standing upright and straight as a pole, his right foot advanced, his left braced behind him, his right hand grasped his revolver, his left tightly clenched; his face pale and determined, his lips and teeth close set.

The dormant lion had been aroused, and the members of the Red Circle shrank back as he hurled at them these words:

"Do not come near me if you hold your life worth a minute's purchase."

To see his mien vanquished, terrorized by a single individual, caused One to fume and fret with rage.

A bright flash of intelligence shot across One's face, and with a hollow laugh, he bent forward, touched something—a spring—a trap in the floor sunk beneath Rodney's feet, so suddenly that he could not save himself, and he was hurled downward with frightful speed.

A moment, and then a splash, and he found himself neck deep in the foul refuse of a sewer.

The trap shut with a snap, and he was in dense darkness.

In plunging into the dirty muck, his revolver had been wrenched from his grasp, and his last weapon of defense was gone.

Yet of little use would such weapons have been to him, for he could not have used a revolver had he been possessed of a dozen.

At first he thought the mass of filth was motionless, but soon he found out his mistake, for it had a movement, although it was slow, and moreover, strive as he might, it commenced slowly drifting him onward—toward what?

He shuddered at the bare thought.

A cry of help trembled on his lips, but knowing how useless such a cry would be, he smothered it ere it was uttered, and he turned his undivided attention to keeping his head above the surface of the slimy mass of reeking filth.

Slowly, inch by inch, he drifted onward.

He was completely unnerved, and struggled for life as an animal might do—from mere instinct.

Suddenly the rays of a light poured in on him, and looking up, he saw an open space several feet above his head at one side. Projecting through this, were the heads of three or four of the murderous, red-handed gang.

They saw him.

A hand was stretched out, and the fingers clutched in his hair, and unheeding the pain it caused the poor unfortunate, the wretch dragged him up from the corruption which held him in such close embrace.

Finally one of Rodney's shoulders was above

the surface, then this was seized, and with a strong and hearty pull he was landed beside the vile crew.

The toga and the rest of his clothing was stripped from his person and thrown back whence he had been drawn, and he was forced along to a room where he was allowed a few moments to partially cleanse his person; then he was allowed to don the articles of clothing he had left in the dressing-room, in addition to a pair of pants which were provided for him.

Dressed thus, and closely guarded, he was conducted back to the Star Chamber.

A wicked, cruel smile played across One's mouth as he saw the prisoner brought in, and with a mocking bow, he said:

"I'm glad to see you back."

"Fiend!" gasped Rodney.

"Thank you," sarcastically. "Had you behaved yourself you might have stood a show for life, but as you did not you must shuffle off this mortal coil before you are another twelve hours older."

"Devil!"

"Saint!" retorted one. "Number Eight will advance for trial."

The deceived member of the Circle arose, and with knees knocking at every step, slowly advanced until he stood before his judge.

He knew how thoroughly powerless a man he was, and knowing how heinous had been his crime in betraying, though unconsciously, the secrets of the Circle, he quaked with fear.

Their law for such a mistake was death! Could he defend himself and his actions so as to escape such a fate?

Questions were put and answered to, and when done, One said, addressing all those assembled:

"Gentlemen, you have heard the evidence. Eight partially gave us away, yet the prisoner would never have entered here but for the reply to my telegram, which stated that one of the members of the Western Circle was in the city. The circumstances surrounding the case are peculiar and you must judge accordingly. A misdemeanor of the kind committed by Eight would mean death if performed through negligence or design. It is for you to judge whether he acted in both or neither. This is the first time we have been called on to face such a circumstance, so we have no precedent to go by, and each must vote according to his convictions. I appoint Two and Four as tellers. The vote will now be taken."

Groaning, Eight sank down in the chair.

Slips of paper were passed around, and each man wrote thereon his verdict.

Then they were collected in a hat, an operation watched by Eight and Rodney with deep interest.

Then the slips were emptied on the secretary's desk and the tellers proceeded to count them.

"Have you finished?" asked One.

"We have," came the reply, and Two faced the company.

The sweat started from every pore of Eight's body, and he bent forward with eyes starting out, lower jaw dropped and twitching, and ears strained to catch the words that fell from Two's lips.

A hush as of death fell on all that assembled, and each waited to hear the verdict.

Two paused for a moment.

His lips opened to speak.

The dread time had arrived.

"Guilty—"

A wild groan burst from Eight's lips and he fell back, pale as a ghost, trembling in every fiber of his body.

"Three votes," concluded Two, finishing the sentence, broken by Eight's groan.

"What?" screamed the spotter, springing to his feet, the blood rushing to his face in a crimson tide.

"Not guilty—twelve votes," said Two, calmly.

"Total number of votes—fifteen; majority for 'not guilty,' nine."

"Thank God!" burst from Eight's lips.

The words caused a shudder of disgust to sweep through Rodney's frame. Thank God! The words were deeper blasphemy than the foulest could have been. Thank God! For what? That he could continue enacting his devilish part in the foul murders perpetrated by the Red Circle.

"Eight, stand up!"

The overjoyed man did so.

Said One, gravely:

"You have been acquitted by a vote of your fellow members. That some think you guilty is evident. The majority think otherwise, however, and have spared you; you may go, but let this terrible trial ever remain fresh in your mind."

With a low bow Eight took his seat among his companions again.

"And now," said One, addressing Rodney, "it's your turn. Vote as to what shall be done with this fellow."

Speedily the vote was taken and counted.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"The vote is —"

"DEATH!"

Rodney had expected nothing else, and bore it manfully.

"Young man," said One, in stern tones, "you have been doomed to death. You put your head between the lion's jaws and must take the consequences." Then to Ten. "Get up steam."

Ten departed on his errand, and he had scarcely crossed the threshold when another figure glided into the room.

It was that of a woman, and clad in night-clothing.

A single glance revealed the fact that she was walking in her sleep.

Rodney gazed at her in surprise; a woman amid those fearful surroundings!

He glanced at her face, and saw stamped there, beauty, youth, innocence.

He took a step toward her, but rude hands drew him back, and a flashing knife on either side of him threatened death at the slightest resistance.

The woman's entrance caused a decided flutter, and One said, hoarsely:

"Keep quiet; she must be got out of here before she wakes."

With noiseless footsteps he glided to her side, and gently took hold of her arm, and endeavored to make her turn.

But gentle as he had been, the contact awoke her, and her fixed eyes moved, and a gleam of intelligence began slowly lighting them up.

The first thing she saw clearly was Rodney, clutched by two men, and threatened by flashing blades of steel.

"Celeste," said One, softly, "come with me."

But she remained fixed to the spot, gazing at the prisoner, and suddenly asked:

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Come, Celeste," and One half-forcibly sought to make her move.

An angry light leaped to her eyes, and she demanded:

"Speak! What are you going to do with him?"

"Nothing!" said One.

"It's a lie!" cried Rodney, "they are going to murder me in cold blood."

"Muzzle him," cried One, in angry tones.

"Now come," and no longer seeking to use persuasion, he endeavored to force the girl from the room.

"I won't!" she cried, petulantly, "and you shan't murder him; do you hear?"

"We won't harm him," said One, adopting soothing tones. "Come, now, Celeste, your attire is not fitting in such a place."

For the first time she seemed to become aware of her appearance, and a blush mantled her fair cheek, as she permitted herself to be unresistingly led away.

Half an hour passed.

One had returned.

Ten now did the same.

"Is all ready?"

"Yes."

"Then lead your prisoner away."

Rodney felt like fighting to the bitter end, and by well-directed blows of his fist, stretched several of his assailants on the floor ere he was secured.

Then they forced him rapidly along, and flung him, struggling and panting, into a room.

Rising quickly to his feet he hurriedly examined the walls of his room; they were of wood.

Hardly had he become aware of this fact when a slight hissing noise attracted his attention.

What could it be?

He listened; still it continued, and each minute grew louder and louder.

Then he began to realize that the air he breathed was becoming more dense, and possessed more heat than when he entered.

Hiss—hiss—hiss! steady and unwavering.

Then the words of One:

"Ten, get up steam," came rushing back on him.

No longer was it a mystery!

He now knew full well the hellish fate they had doomed him to suffer—and that was—suffocation by steam.

Hiss—hiss—hiss!

Hotter and hotter the atmosphere grew, until the sweat was running like rain down his body.

Heavier and denser it grew at the same time, until every mouthful of air gulped down his throat seemed like so much lead.

His sufferings began to grow acute.

Hotter and hotter, the steam filled every nook and cranny of the room; he could find refuge nowhere; hotter and hotter, until his throat began to burn; hotter and hotter—hotter and hotter, until he lived in hell itself.

"God in mercy pity me!" he gasped, "pity me—pity me! If I only had a weapon—a knife—something—I would end this horrible torture."

Hotter and hotter!

He held his coat before his mouth and breathed through its texture until he could do so no longer; his tongue lolled from his mouth, and immediately was blistered; he drew it in with a cry of anguish, and like a madman rushed frantically around; no escape—no escape—death by suffocation!

With a last wild cry of horror and anguish, burning, suffocating, he threw himself on the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

AMY'S PERSECUTOR.

WITH mind made happy by the prospect of oranges in plenty in Heaven, little Felix remained silent during the few minutes longer which the physician stayed.

When he left, Amy accompanied him as far as the door, and anxiously asked:

"How is he to-day?"

"No better," was the reply, in a tone that clearly implied the contrary.

Yet to settle her doubts, Amy asked:

"Is he worse, sir?"

"Just a trifle, perhaps," was the tender reply of the physician. "Now see here," he continued, "you must be a brave, good girl, and hear the truth. He will never get better!"

"Never?"

"No."

"Do you mean it, sir?"

"Yes. He is injured internally and is gradually sinking. He may live some time, perhaps several weeks, but then he must die; there is no help for him!"

"Poor Felix—poor Felix," she sobbed.

"Hush!" said the doctor, "he will hear you."

"He knows it," was the sobbing answer. "He has told me before that he's going to die. Poor Felix!" and she hastily dried her tears and returned to his bedside.

Intuitively he seemed to know that she had been asking the doctor about him; and taking hold of her hand, he said:

"Didn't the doctor tell you the same as I did?"

The question was too plumply put to admit of an evasion, and she answered:

"Pretty nearly, Felix; not quite, though."

"But I'm right," he persisted; "I know I am. I'm going to die, and go to Heaven, and—and Amy, I'll mind the time when you're coming, and save you some oranges."

The tears were falling fast from Amy's eyes, and Felix, catching sight of them, said:

"Don't cry, Amy; it makes me feel bad. And then, after a short silence, he said: "Amy, are you my real sister?"

"No."

"But you love me just the same?"

"I do, Felix—I do," she brokenly answered.

"You are the only person on earth I ever loved, for you are the only one that was ever kind to me."

For several minutes he was silent, then he gently pressed her hand, saying:

"Even mammy hasn't been good to you."

"Not always."

"But will be after I'm dead."

"Hush, Felix," said Amy, with a shudder, every allusion to death grating roughly on her sensitive nerves.

Just then the door opened and there entered a stout and able-bodied Irishwoman.

"There's mammy now," said Felix, and raising his weak, shrill voice, he called: "Mammy—mammy, come here?"

She crossed the room, and her first question was as to how he felt.

"Happy, mammy; very happy; the doctor says I'm a goin' ter die."

Mrs. Brophy had been a widow since the time that Felix was a year old; the constant struggle for her daily bread since that time had given her little chance of cultivating any deep affection for her boy, and she had in the past been accustomed to award him more kicks, and thumps, and blows, than kisses or caresses.

When, some weeks previous, Felix had been brought home, groaning and nearly dead from

the result of an accident, she had accepted the situation without any particular feeling, thinking that soon he would be running around the streets again; yet, when she was met thus plumply by the physician's fiat, she grew pale, and suppressed affection came rushing to the surface, and she cried in anguish:

"No—no, Felix, that can't be!"

"But it's so, mammy; ain't it, Amy?"

Mrs. Brophy turned her eyes on the girl, who, in answer to her inquiring glance, slowly nodded her head.

"Tain't so—tain't so!" screamed Mrs. Brophy. "Ye've been filling the bye's head with nonsense, so ye have. Get out of my house, ye hussy!" and she angrily seized Amy by the arm.

"Mammy—mammy," pleaded Felix, "let Amy be; don't you go for to hurtin' her, for she loves your little Felix. She's a good girl, so she is, and does work when she can get it, and gives you all the money. Nay, mammy, let her be, and don't ever strike her ag'in. Will you promise that?"

Mrs. Brophy's eyes were anger-lighted as she turned towards the bed, but the sight of his appealing face she could not resist, and released her hold of the girl.

"Will you promise, mammy?"

"Yes," she replied. "Oh, Felix—Felix—Felix! Don't die; ye must get well."

For the first time in Amy's remembrance she saw Mrs. Brophy melted and thoroughly wretched.

"The holy Virgin forgive me that ever I struck ye a blow!" she cried, as she scanned more closely his wan face, and saw plainly written there the signs of slowly approaching dissolution.

"Say no more, mammy," said Felix, softly, "I was a bad boy betimes."

"No, ye never war," she cried.

But soon things changed. Mrs. Brophy's sorrow was more on the surface than deep, and she began to feel hungry, and intimated her intention of going out to get something for supper with the dollar her day's work had earned her.

When she came back she set her purchases on a rickety table; they consisted of two loaves of bread that had cost her sixteen cents; a half a pound of butter for fifteen, a few slices of bacon for which she paid eighteen cents; the remaining fifty-one cents was represented by a large black bottle filled to the neck with rum.

This was her failing.

Honest as the day is long—a hard worker—she might have lived comfortably but for that one weakness—a passion for drink.

When money was short she would go to almost any length to procure her dram.

The frugal supper was disposed of, and then, after a short crying spell over her boy, Mrs. Brophy sat down to enjoy the fruits of half a day's hard work, and by nine o'clock she was in a glorious state of intoxication.

It was at this juncture that a knock came at the door.

To Amy it was familiar, and she crouched low over Felix's bed, as if the sleeping boy could afford her protection.

"Come in," hiccupped Mrs. Brophy, rousing herself from her drunken stupor.

The door opened and there entered the individual whom Rodney had seen follow the girl on the night he had prevented her jumping off the pier.

At sight of him Amy shuddered and averted her face.

"Halloo, Mrs. Brophy," he said, boisterously, "how are you?"

"Purty well," was the maudlin rejoinder.

"Make yourself at home."

"So I will," he replied, and advancing toward the bed, he said: "Ah, my bird, how are you?" and he laid his hand familiarly on Amy's shoulder; she shrunk from the contact as if he had been a poisonous viper, while her face exhibited the deepest disgust and most intense aversion.

"How is Felix?" he next asked, feigning not to notice her rebuff.

"Worse," she sadly replied; "the doctor says he cannot live."

"Sho!" and he whistled long and low. "That's bad! Does she know it?" jerking his thumb toward Mrs. Brophy.

"Yes."

"And gets drunk on the strength of it," he chuckled; "that's good! And how have you been since I saw you last?"

No answer did she vouchsafe.

"Come—come," he said, playfully, yet a little gruffly, "no more nonsense; you know you love me—"

"I don't," she snapped, suddenly showing her spirit.

"Oh, yes you do. You know you promised to marry me."

Her only reply was a groan.

"And," in a stern tone, "I'm not going to be put off much longer. A week from to-night I'm going to bring the priest around to marry us."

"Tom Driscoll," and Amy spoke in a low but determined tone, "it is true I gave you such a promise, but I was forced to it, and since then I have changed my mind, and I've told you so."

"Nonsense! You didn't mean it."

"I did," and she spoke loudly and angrily.

"That makes no odds," he said, doggedly, "you've got to marry me, and that's an end of it."

"I won't—so there!" and she stamped her foot decidedly.

"Wizzer matter?" called out Mrs. Brophy's maudlin voice.

"Amy says she ain't goin' to marry me; what do you say to that? Remember what I told you!" he added, in conclusion.

"What do I say?" brokenly said the drunken woman, "I say she'll do it."

"Next week?" asked Driscoll, eagerly.

"Yesh."

"What!" cried Amy. "Why, Mrs. Brophy, do you want me to leave Felix?"

The boy had been awakened by the noise, and this remark of Amy's conveyed to his mind the information that he might possibly lose to him the dearest person on earth, his mother not excepted.

Suddenly arising half up in bed, he said, in a shrill, petulant tone:

"Tom Driscoll, you sha'n't take my Amy away. Mammy—mammy, you won't let him, will you?"

"Remember what I told you, Mrs. Brophy," said Driscoll.

The drunken woman arose to her feet and staggered to the bedside; Driscoll's words rang in her ears; she was about to reply affirmatively; then she caught sight of the pale, pleading face of Felix; maternal feelings conquered, and with as steady tones as she could assume, she said:

"You shall not marry Amy while Felix lives."

"Thank God!" muttered the girl, happy, because of the slight respite thus given her.

"Then," said Driscoll, savagely turning on Mrs. Brophy, "you won't stick to your bargain."

"Yes."

"Then she must marry me next week."

"No—no," squeaked Felix. "Mammy, don't let him take Amy away."

"No more he sha'n't," and Mrs. Brophy spoke grimly and decidedly.

A happy exclamation fell from Amy's lips.

It angered Driscoll, and he roughly said:

"I'll change all that before long. You'll marry me yet!"

"Never!"

He vouchsafed no reply, but with an angry oath on his lips strode from the room and descended the stairs heavily.

Amy uttered a sigh of satisfaction when he was gone, and muttered to herself:

"'Tis well; now I can stay with Felix until all is over; and after he is dead—God forgive me for thinking so coolly about it—I'll run away from this place and hide myself forever—forever."

"Amy—Amy!" said Felix, weakly, stretching out his arms; she sat down on the edge of the bed, then stretched herself on it at full length; and cuddling her in his arms the slowly dying boy was soon slumbering softly.

A thud announced that the drunken woman had found a resting place on the floor, and then Amy, too, drifted away into dreamland.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE NEMESIS OF THE RED CIRCLE.

In the star chamber the members of the Red Circle were gathered.

After throwing Rodney into the "steam room," the cold-blooded villains returned and announced the successful completion of their portion of the task.

One immediately drew a cord connecting with a valve in a steam-pipe leading from a boiler to the room in which Rodney was confined, the action being followed, as the reader knows, by the steam rushing into the room.

For over an hour One allowed the steam to run in, then cut off the steam and sent Ten and Twelve to bring the body.

They were gone but a few minutes, and then returned with a body in their arms; but so swollen, and blistered and distorted as to be unrecognizable.

"There must have been a fearful head of steam

on," thought One. "I never before saw a body quite so badly disfigured."

It was a horrible sight to look at.

The flesh had cracked, and at every visible spot it had curled up like little rolls of parchment; the swollen, blistered tongue hung from his mouth; the hair, scalded loose, fell in handfuls from the head; used to terrible sights, many a one that saw the body turned sick and faint at heart and averted their faces.

"To the tub," said One. "Let the last act in the drama be performed."

There was a ghastly humor in his words that would have appalled all but the terrible gang with which he had surrounded himself.

The body was conveyed to the tub and placed therein.

The little crank was turned half way; a wait of some duration, then another half turn; a few minutes more, and once again the paneling was drawn back and the lid of tub raised.

Once more One said:

"Well?"

And once again was the reply returned:

"It is empty."

"Now, boys," said One, calmly, "we will disperse until twelve to-morrow night. And to the spotters I will only say, do your best. We have not made a cent now in some time. Above all, be careful not to be led into doing aught to betray ourselves, for were that done, we would all fare pretty hardly. That is all."

One stepped from the platform, crossed the room, entered the hall, and walking along that, went into his dressing room, thence passed through the secret entrance, and a few minutes later was stretched on his bed, and sleeping as soundly and peacefully as though he enjoyed the blessings of a stainless conscience, instead of one blackened by the foulest of deeds under Heaven.

Several days slipped by, and all was quiet in the secret home of the Red Circle.

No new victim had been drawn into their net; the only ruffle on the surface of their calmness was the fact that one of their number had not been seen.

Many were the conjectures as to the cause of his absence, but not one of the Circle ever dreamed of the truth.

A week had sped by.

It was late in the afternoon, about six o'clock, when a dark figure glided into the Star Chamber. A mask covered the person's features, a toga concealed the figure.

At the very threshold the figure stopped, and raising one hand towards Heaven, uttered these words, in a low, but determined tone:

"Henceforth I devote my life to clearing out this nest of human vipers, God helping me! As they made others suffer, so shall they suffer! They will bear the tortures of the damned, and God have mercy on their souls! This foul blot on humanity shall be wiped away in blood; and I, the Nemesis of the Red Circle, shall spill it! By the God above us I swear it!"

Could the members of the Red Circle have heard that solemnly-uttered oath, they would have trembled in their shoes.

In one hand Nemesis, for so we shall call the person, carried a dark lantern.

He shoved back the slide, far enough to emit just the smallest possible ray of light, and then crossed the room.

He entered another, torture chamber "A," and stepping quickly hither and thither, examined everything. Then into "B" he went, and here familiarized himself with all the room contained.

Through every hall and room he went, leaving nothing unexamined save the dressing-rooms, which were locked, each man carrying his own key.

As he was gliding along, and without an instant's warning, he came face to face with an individual attired similarly to himself. The newcomer was number Ten.

The latter glanced suspiciously at the lantern, and asked:

"Why do you carry that, and what are you here for?"

"To both questions, because I please," was the short reply.

"I suppose," and Ten's voice had a severe ring in it, "that you know none are allowed to enter here between ten in the morning and nine at night?"

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry; I'll trouble you no further."

And Nemesis turned to go, but his face was turned in the direction of the Star Chamber.

"Hold!" cried Ten; "I do not recognize you; what's your number? And you have no business there."

"Indeed!"

And on Nemesis glided.

"Stop!" shouted Ten.

No reply; simply a disregard of his command. Angered by the apparent contempt shown him, Ten started after Nemesis with a rapid step, but caught him not until he had reached the center of torture chamber A, then Ten grasped his shoulder, with the savage question:

"Now, what do you want here?"

"That!" came the equally savage reply, and whirling rapidly around, Nemesis struck Ten a heavy blow on the head with the butt of a revolver, felling him to the floor in a partially insensible condition.

A glad cry burst from the lips of Nemesis, and setting down his lantern, he jumped to the paneling, shoved it violently back, threw back the lid of the tub, sprang to Ten's side, picked him up like a child, and carrying him across the room, deposited him in the tub and slammed down the lid just as Ten recovered consciousness sufficient to realize his horrible situation; he struggled like a madman, plunging and kicking, but all to no purpose, the lid was securely fastened.

He commenced howling dismally, but stopped as the voice of Nemesis struck his ear.

The words uttered were:

"You have two minutes to make your peace with God! And as you hope for mercy employ them well."

"Let me out!" wailed the wretched man, "let me out!"

"No!" firmly, decidedly.

"Fiend! monster!"

"Ay, and you helped to make me so. Did you ever spare any one? No. Neither will I spare one of your accursed gang! Your time is up; prepare to meet your God!"

A wild, terrified wail burst from Ten's lips, succeeded by others wilder and more terrified; Nemesis sprang to the platform, grasped the little crank, and as he turned it, gave a wild, exultant flourish with his free hand, and cried excitedly:

"The work of the Nemesis has commenced!"

Another soul-harrowing scream, a rush of something liquid, a wild wail cut short, and then all was terrible silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AVENGER'S WORK.

A wild cry of mortal agony—cut short. A rush of a heavy liquid mass, and then—DEATH.

A wicked life had been ended, a trembling, blood-stained soul was in the presence of its Maker.

The dying wail of Ten would have made the flesh of most men creep with horror; yet the only effect it had on Nemesis was to cause a cruel smile to play about his lips.

"As ye did unto others, so ye shall be done by."

As he uttered these words he drew himself erect, and tightly clenched his hands, his eyes flashing with a vindictive fire.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." So says the Mosaic law. But I say, 'torture for torture, death for death.'

The determination ringing in every word, the clenched hands, the full veined forehead, the compressed lips, each and all proclaimed his ability to carry out his resolution to the bitter end.

He stepped on the platform, and quietly took the seat of the Grand Inquisitor.

Coolly and calmly he sat there, and minutely surveying his surroundings.

Once he arose, and spent a few minutes in examining the electric battery on the short pillar at his right hand; then sank back in the chair with a smile on his lips, and the words:

"I will now reap the reward due to my study of electricity when at school. Thanks—many thanks to old Whaler, who would persist in knocking a knowledge of electricity into me, although I detested it like blazes; yes, thanks to the old brick, for with that very information I'll make these vile bloodhounds dance a devil's hornpipe, so help me saints and sinners."

There was a grim humor underlying the words, sufficient to chill the blood of a gentle-hearted listener.

The moments dragged slowly by until, perhaps, thirty or more had passed.

Then once again he arose, went into the open space in the paneling, unfastened the lid of the tub, and glanced inside.

Stayed and sustained as Nemesis was by a strong and powerful will, the sickening sight was too much for even him.

All that remained of him, who an hour before

had been a healthy, living, strong, well-built man, was a mass of reeking pulp, about the consistency of soft soap, emanating from which was a sulphurous odor.

Staggered by what he saw, Nemesis let drop the lid and turned away.

Regaining his composure in a very few minutes, he stepped on the platform, and turned the crank again.

This was followed by the rippling sound of running water, which he allowed to continue for some minutes, and then stopped it, stepped once more to the tub, and raised its cover.

Again he glanced in, but no horrible sight met his eyes, for the tub was empty, no vestige remaining of the mass which it had held.

A sigh of satisfaction escaped him, and he closed the tub, with the remark:

"It is finished! My work has begun! woe—woe to you all!"

He slid the panel back to its place, picked up his dark lantern, closed the slide until he could but barely see his way, and then glided noiselessly out of the chamber, along the hall, and halted before the dressing-rooms.

From a pocket he drew a bit of wax which he jammed into the keyhole of the room numbered "One;" the impression he surveyed with satisfaction, and then glided along until he stood in the main hall, before entering which he made sure of its being clear of the presence of human beings.

At a spot where no door was visible, he caused one to open by using a concealed spring, and stepping through it, he began ascending a narrow flight of stairs.

Arrived at the top of these, he drew fully back the slide of his lantern, thus projecting forward a wide band of light that revealed much of the interior of the place.

The apartment was, perhaps, twenty feet across and fifteen feet deep.

At the back part was a door, leading apparently to a room beyond.

The floor was carpeted, and the room was furnished well, if not elegantly; chairs were ranged against the wall, and a sofa occupied one corner; in the center of the room was a large table, and some distance away was a smaller one; the former had on it some dishes, and part of an uneaten meal, while the latter held a work-basket containing yarns, bright worsteds, threads, needles and the like; beside the table a chair stood, and on that was lying a half-finished article of woman's wear.

This was the retreat of Celeste.

Hardly had Nemesis stepped into the room than she appeared through the door at the rear, and with a childish ripple of laughter, cried:

"Welcome back!"

She came bounding forward, and threw her arms impulsively around his neck.

"I'm so glad you've come. Celeste was lonesome—Celeste was afraid you'd never come again?" and her voice was tender and plaintive. "See, here is something for you to eat, but it's all cold! Wait till I light the gas."

Hanging over the table was a chandelier, one jet of which was lighted.

This disclosed the fact that the ceiling of the room was of brick, low, and arched.

Nemesis sat down his lantern, and with a few words of thanks, sat down at the table and ate heartily.

When through he arose, saying:

"I'm going to bed, Celeste, so good-night."

"Must you go?"

"Yes."

"Then you must," and she seemed inclined to pout a little; then brightening up, she said; "but you know best, I suppose. Good-night," and throwing her arms once more around his neck, she kissed him passionately.

His mind was too much filled with his dreams of retribution to be given to much tenderness, yet he returned it, and not with a lack of warmth, either.

"Poor girl," he thought. "I wonder why she is kept here?"

Would the pity of this stony-hearted avenger have been wanting—would he have included her in his plans of destruction, had he known her share in the dread tragedies of that underground hell?

Who can tell?

"And now, good-night," he repeated.

"Good-night," she said again; "go to sleep; no harm shall come to you, for Celeste will watch!"

She had a strange way, but common to most demented people, and often noticeable in children, of putting herself, when speaking, in third person; at first it had puzzled Nemesis, but time had made him accustomed to it, and it no longer sounded strange to him.

He passed through the door from which Celeste had emerged, and entered her bedroom, just half the size of the outer room; opening from the bedroom was another of the same size, and it was to this that Nemesis made his way; the door was secured by a patent lock, of which Celeste had given him the key; this latter room was totally unfurnished, save for a mattress lying on the floor in one corner, which she had taken from her bed to give him, and a single chair.

And thus, not knowing what she was doing, the crazed girl was harboring a sworn destroyer of the Red Circle, and making herself a traitress.

She had said that he might sleep and she would watch.

None could enter his room without passing through hers, an attempt to do which would have made her a tigress, for beneath all, there occasionally flashed forth for a moment evidences of a high and fierce temper.

Once inside of his own room, Nemesis threw off the mantle, as he had previously done the mask, muttering:

"And now to work."

The chair stood at one side against the wall, and directly above it a number of bricks had been pulled out of the ceiling.

Standing on the chair the ceiling was within easy reach, and Nemesis proceeded to endeavor to loosen the bricks surrounding the narrow orifice. Set as they were in cement which had become almost as hard as rock, this was no easy task,

considering the tools he had to work with, they being naught but a heavy carving knife and the fork belonging to it.

But he had energy in abundance, an article which, properly applied, nearly always leads to success.

He forced one brick loose, and finally wrenched it out altogether.

Another soon followed, then another, until the hole was at least three feet in diameter. Then he stopped, and with a sigh of satisfaction got down from his perch and took a short rest.

"Now to remove the earth," he muttered. "If I can only work the thing at the proper angle, and come out in the next yard, I'll be all right, but if it chances to come out in this," shrugging his shoulders, "it will be all wrong—I've got to take the risk."

A thin bed of cement still remained, but this he soon punched a hole through, and then began digging into the soft earth, dropping handful after handful gently to the floor, so that he made no noise. This work he continued until near midnight. After stopping, he went to one corner of the room, pulled up the carpet, and then took up a piece of the flooring.

Between this and the ceiling of the room below was a space of six or eight inches. The ceiling was of wood, and it chanced that a knot had dropped out. Lying on his stomach with his eye to the knot-hole, he was able to obtain an excellent view of the whole interior of the room, which was none other than the torture-chamber, A.

Here he laid for some time, perhaps several hours, but the room below remained deserted, and silent, and dark.

"Nothing there to-night, I guess," he muttered. "I must get to bed."

Hardly had he finished, when he stopped in his half made movement toward rising, and sank prone on the floor again.

He had heard steps and voices below him.

"It is singular," he heard a voice say, a voice which he at once recognized as that of One.

"Yes, it is so. Perhaps he's got off on a bender. He used to, sometimes, you know."

Nemesis' lip curled with a scornful smile, for he knew of whom they were speaking.

A light was lighted in the room below, and the watcher recognized One's companion as his right hand man, Two.

"So he did—so he did," mused one, referring to the "benders" mentioned. "But he hasn't been on any lately," and then for a moment he was silent. Suddenly turning, he said, in a low, intense, penetrating whisper: "Sixteen went first, now Ten! What does it mean? Are we on the road to destruction?"

"Ay!" muttered Nemesis, "on the road to destruction and the tortures of the damned, and—God help you!"

Will be continued in "Wide Awake Library," No. 195, entitled, "THE NEMESIS; or, TRACKED TO THEIR DOOM."

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